EXPERIENCE INTO IDENTITY:
THE WRITINGS OF BRITISH CONSCRIPT SOLDIERS, 1916-1918

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ABSTRACT

Between January 1916 and March 1919 2,504,183 men were conscripted into the British army -- representing as such over half the wartime enlistments. Yet to date, the conscripts and their contribution to the Great War have not been acknowledged or studied. This is mainly due to the image of the war in England, which is focused upon the heroic plight of the volunteer soldiers on the Western Front. Historiography, literary studies and popular culture all evoke this image, which is based largely upon the volumes of poems and memoirs written by young volunteer officers, of middle and upper class background, such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. But the British wartime army was not a society of poets and authors who knew how to distil experience into words; nor, as mentioned, were all the soldiers volunteers. This dissertation therefore attempts to explore the cultural identity of this unknown population through a collection of diaries, letters and unpublished accounts of some conscripts; and to do so with the aid of a novel methodological approach.

In Part I the concept of this research is explained, as a qualitative examination of all the chosen writings, with emphasis upon eliciting the attitudes of the writers to the factual events they recount. Each text -- e.g. letter or diary -- was read literally, and also in light of the entire collection, thus allowing for the emergence of personal and collective narratives concurrently. In Part II the results of this method of research were used to create an extended account of the human experiences of these conscript soldiers -- from enlistment through to daily life on the Western Front. The narrative is constructed out of their words, and written from their perspective, as a subjective account of their wartime existence. The result of this synthesis of attitude and experience is an explanation of these conscripts' cultural identity, as a conclusion to Part II.

CONTENTS

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To the memory of my mother

Lila Bet-El

"The First World War did not have much reality."
(W.B. Yeats)

Introduction

This dissertation is about reality and its many versions and interpretations. The overall framework of reality is that of the Great War; the distinct version presented here is that of British conscripts; and the interpretation offered concerns the effects of both upon the cultural identity of the conscripts. From the distance of seventy years, nothing about the First World War appears real, and yet for those who lived through it there was no other reality. Every book about the British experience or presentation of the war offers another version of this reality -- often purporting to be "objective" or collective in its approach, in that it deals with the majority of the participants, or the majority of the sources. This present study makes no such claim: it is avowedly subjective in its approach, for both methodological and qualitative reasons, seeking to present the war experiences of some British conscripts from their unique stance and in their own words. For this research is an attempt to answer one central question: what was the identity of these men, who were conscripted into the British army between 1916 and 1918? And the search for an identity is not in the events, but rather in their perception.

The Great War ended over seventy years ago, yet in many ways it still stands out as a unique and incomprehensible phenomenon. Atrocities had occurred before and certainly since, but the shattering realities of this war still render it in a class of its own. Indeed, judging by the perpetual flow of scholarship, popular books and films, the passage of time seems only to have enhanced both the importance of the war and the questions posed by it. Yet the salient

facts were as clear then as they are now: a generation of men was mutilated, alongside many cultural and social concepts carefully constructed in the Western world throughout the preceding century. Indeed, the cognizance of cultural destruction was apparent even in its creation. As early as 1915 Freud wrote of "The Disillusionment of War" claiming it

> "tramples in blind fury on all that comes in its way, as though there were to be no future and no peace among men after it is over. It cuts all the common bonds between the contending peoples, and threatens to leave a legacy of embitterment that will make any renewal of those bonds impossible for a long time to come."[1]

It was destruction, whether through death or diminishment, which became the central cultural image of the war.

The events themselves created memory, which was then transcribed into history, and from the combination of both evolved mythology. This is especially true of the trenches in Flanders, which, correctly or not, currently symbolize the Great War in the minds of most: mental images of long lines of trenches in a totally desecrated landscape; of much shooting and shelling; of patriotic men volunteering to fight for King and Country; of gallant poets donning uniform and entering battle. And in actual fact, these brave men of letters assisted most in the creation of the mythology of the Western Front. However, the British army was not a society of poets and authors who could distill experience into poetic imagery; nor only of courageous volunteers. Rather, it was composed of an anonymous mass of men from all walks of life, whom we still perceive as no more than the "Unknown Soldier" -- a term coined in the Great War -- of war memorials. Yet still so little is known of these men or of the realities trench warfare imposed upon them. And what has been discovered both through literature and

[1] Freud, Sigmund, "Thoughts for the Time on War and Death (1915)," in Civilization, Society and Religion, (The Pelican Freud Library, Vol.12, Penguin, 1985), p.65.

research, does not refer to an immense population of over two million: the men who were conscripted into the army after 1916.

The conscripts were not a minority population within the wartime British army. Between August 1914 and December 1915 2,466,719 men volunteered; but from January 1916 to the end of the war 2,504,183 men were conscripted into the army, thus 50.3 per cent of all wartime enlistments were conscripts.[2] Indeed, by the Allied summer advance of 1918 a majority of the men fighting in the BEF were conscripts, and it was this force which won the war. And yet, the conscripts as a population disappeared whilst a minority of approximately 16,500 men, the conscientious objectors, have been widely discussed;[3] whereas the regular soldiers and the volunteers have been documented in every scholarly and literary form throughout the past seventy years.

This study therefore attempts to investigate elements of this unknown population -- and as such it is subjective in that it is focused upon them alone. Yet, it must be noted at the start that a methodological subjectivity is also imposed, in that the emphases of this work are equally upon the textual sources, the experiences embedded within them, and the people who created them. In other words, the texts themselves are the subject of this study, as much as

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[2] Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War, (HMSO, 1922), p.364.

[3] Since the war a wealth of biographies and autobiographies have appeared, and two major monographs have been published in the last twenty years: John Rae, Conscience and Politics, (OUP, 1970); and Thomas C. Kennedy, The Hound of Conscience: A History of the No-Conscription Fellowship 1914-1919, (University of Arkansas Press, 1981). For a comprehensive list of publications and sources on the subject see: Kennedy, "An Essay on Sources," pp. 303-16.

their creators. A novel methodology, which is explained in chapter 1, was created in order to draw all these elements together. It is based upon elements from the disciplines of literature, history, cultural criticism and sociology. As such this research tool enabled a detailed analysis of each word and sentence of each text, a system which ultimately facilitated a collective narrative to emerge from all the texts. But due to the extensive analysis required by this method, it is important to clearly define the group of texts to which it is applied. Since the British conscripts of the Great War had not yet been researched,[4] it was decided that their texts would be analysed. Thus a broad subject matter was defined. The group of texts chosen to illuminate a section of this subject, through the created methodology, was elicited from the archive of the Imperial War Museum. This limitation, which enabled a clear definition of the sources, was arrived at after a comprehensive survey, both qualitative and quantitative, of other sources.

One of the reasons for the lack of research into the background (or any other aspect) of the conscripts is the lack of obvious sources. Many books were written by veterans of the war, but very few conscripts published their memoirs,[5] and those who did cannot be deemed representative -- both in number and in social class, the latter being a prevalent problem in the overall majority of British literature of the Great War.[6] Frederick Voigt, for example,

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[4] The only known work on the subject is a short paper by Ian Beckett, "The Real Unknown Army: British Conscripts 1916-1919," in The Great War, Vol.2, No.1, Nov. 1989, pp.4-13.

[5] Those that are known are: F. Gray, Confessions of a Private, (Blackwells, 1929); F.A. Voigt, Combed Out, (Cape, London, 1929); Paul Fussell, ed., The Ordeal of Alfred M. Hale, (Leo Cooper, 1975); F.A.J. Taylor, The Bottom of the Barrel, (Regency Press, 1978); W.V. Tilsley, Other Ranks, (Cobden-Sanderson, 1931).

[6] The majority of these volumes, especially those which rose to prominence, were written by junior officers, mostly from a public school, and often of an Oxbridge background: "Those

who claimed that his book was "no more than a rearrangement of his diary and his letters home,"[7] divided the narrative between eloquently formulated reflections upon his ideological convictions; muted tirades against his existence; and lengthy paragraphs of speech and dialogue uttered by his "common" comrades:

> Gorblimey -- when's this bastard life goin' ter end! When I think o' Sunday mornin' at 'ome wi' breakfast in bed an' the News o' the World wi' a decent divorce or murder, I feel fit ter cry me eyes out.[8]

Given that there are many such passages of reported speech in the book, often much longer in length, Voigt must either have had an extraordinary memory or he noted down each word as it was spoken; or he recreated it later within his own cognizance of the speech. In any case, this is a rather impersonal memoir, with an approach akin to that of Professor Higgins listening to Eliza -- out of his own personal fascination with a species rather than out of empathy.

Alfred Hale's memoir, as a comparative example, is far more interesting simply because it is so personal and focused upon himself. He recreated only his own experience, from his own distinctive stance; being aware of other people only as a reflection upon himself and his situation. The value of his work is therefore far greater for the purposes of this study because it offers an immense insight into the man and the manner in which he tackled his imposed military identity as a conscript.

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who wrote of their experience are by definition atypical, and it would be hopelessly misleading to regard the testimony of literate, educated, upper-and-middle-class combatants as descriptive of the war experience as a whole." (Eric J. Leed, "Class and Disillusionment in World War I", Journal of Modern History, 50 (December 1978), p.682.)

[7] Voigt, op. cit. p.7.

[8] ibid, p.22.

On the whole therefore, published sources were not a viable option for the purposes of this research, for both qualitative and quantative reasons. Personal primary sources such as letters, diaries and written accounts appeared far preferable, not least because of their avowed personal stance. For no "other form of source will bring historians as close to the meaning the past had for those who made it and were made by it."[9] The basic problem with this approach was the location of the sources. Due to the myth of the volunteer soldier, many conscripts did not identify themselves as such. It is also possible that many conscripts came from a class of society that did not have a tradition of letter or diary writing, nor of keeping such material. Therefore a lot of their private papers were probably destroyed through the years, or are still kept in the privacy of their families. In addition, those papers that were passed on to archives are not catalogued under a subject heading of "conscripts", since none such has been allocated. In short, the British conscripts to the First World War do not officially exist, and thus the quest to document them had to be undertaken by a process of elimination rather than by a direct approach.

In order to apply the methodology created for this research, it was important to find a relatively large group of private papers. However, since this was primarily an exercise in textual analysis, thus a qualitative research which could reflect upon the exact analysis of the texts themselves, the group of texts had to be large enough for the purposes of creating substantial categories of data, and yet of a size which would enable their analysis and transcription. Bearing this in mind, it was decided to base this study upon the collections of

[9] J. Burnett, D. Vincent, & D. Mayall, eds., The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated Critical Biography, (The Harvester Press, 1984), p.xxi.

private papers in the Imperial War Museum, which have often been selectively used for both historical and literary research. Yet no previous study based upon the archive has examined those collections pertinent only to the conscripts of the Great War. In addition, as will be shown below, the prevalent method of research used was a literal reading of these papers, in accordance with a pre-conceived approach, based either upon literary images or political and military theories. Often quotes from these works were used as "authentic" illumination of a narrative created by the latter day author, thus also removing the significance of the words from the context in which they were written. The major innovation of this study therefore, is that beyond dealing with the conscripts, an unknown population, it seeks to create a narrative which remains, as far as possible, that of these men themselves, in their own words, rather than that of an omnipotent narrator.

The Western Front was chosen as the geographical limitation of the study since a majority of the conscripts eventually arrived there; and also because the investigation of myths should be conducted on their home ground. January 1916, the commencement of conscription, to the Armistice of November 1918 are the chronological limits within which conscripts experienced trench warfare. "Conscripts" for the purpose of this study are therefore defined as those men who were enlisted in the British Army under the various Military Service Acts between 1916 and 1918.

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The bulk of this dissertation is devoted to the works of the conscripts themselves. It is a presentation of their experiences in their own words, as a means of investigating their identity.

In terms of content, the innovation of this approach is in its focus upon the human experience of these men, rather than upon the military one. Instead of battles and shells it is a discussion of baths and food; and this for a number of reasons. First, this is an examination of identity in war, and not war itself. The fact was that the conscripts arrived into a given situation of war, and it is against this background that they wrote of their experiences. Thus shooting, sniping, "going over the top" and death were an integral part of their surroundings. Second, in a search for identity, the war as a "purely military event ... is of strictly limited interest."[10] Thus the conscripts' interpretation of battles would add little to the body of knowledge about the latter, beyond yet another personalized view of it. This is also due to the third point, which is that "for appreciable periods armies were immobile within trench systems. Large scale offensives were relatively infrequent."[11] An examination of the conscripts' military experiences would therefore be of limited use here, since it could shed light only upon a small portion of their existence.

The fourth reason rests upon two theses concerning the individual soldier at war. In the aforementioned article and a subsequent book,[12] Ashworth developes the theory that the "story of both large and small dimensions of the First World war is, to some extent, one of increasing bureaucratization: the conflict grew progressively more vast and specialized, as well as more and more centrally controlled and regulated by formal rules; whereas areas of

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[10] E.J. Leed, No man's land: Combat and Identity in World war I, (CUP, 1979), p.x.

[11] Tony Ashworth, "The Sociology of Trench Warfare 1914-18," in British Journal of Sociology, (XIX, 4 (Dec. 1968), pp. 407-20), p.409.

[12] idem, Trench Warfare 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System, (Macmillan, 1980).

personal and local discretion diminished."[13] This idea may be complimented by Leeds' claim that the "experience of war was an experience of marginality, and the "'change of character' undergone by the combatant could adequately be summarized as marginalization."[14] In other words, both agree that the individual became diminished in the war, either through bureaucracy or through experience. Whilst agreeing with them, I would suggest that the one field in which the individual cannot become diminished is his personal existence -- on its very human level. Regardless of his status as cannon-fodder or General, a person is always aware of his bodily needs and his preservation. Ashworth has documented well the military aspects of the individual's bureaucratization; whereas Leeds has written convincingly about the psychological changes wrought by the individual's marginalization. In this study, therefore, I propose to examine the human existence of the conscript as a synthesis of both approaches.

The fifth reason pertains to the concepts of heroism prevelant at the time. When discussing this issue, battle tends to be the focal point, not only because it was so dramatic, but simply because it is more tangible in its results to the onlooker -- even one of many years past. The Charge of the Light Brigade, catastrophic though it was, has sustained its image and appeal in the public mind not only because it was heroic, but also because it failed. The results of the charge gave an image to the act itself. The force, which was disproportionate to the undertaking, failed; yet the mere attempt has become enshrined. "The camp life of the Light Brigade," or "The day the Light Brigade went hungry because supplies were unavailable," are not images that are appealing to the public mind, basically because they are not tragic. The critic Northrop Frye explains the appeal of tragedy to the onlooker as

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[13] ibid, p.56.

[14] Leed, op. cit. p.15.

> intelligible because its catastrophe is plausibly related to its situation. Irony isolates from the tragic situation the sense of arbitrariness, of the victims having been unlucky, selected at random or by lot, and no more deserving of what happens to him than anyone else would be.[15]

In other words, tragedy is a catastrophic event unique to those who experienced it, largely removed from the sphere of regular life; and yet understandable in that it occurred to other people, thus individuals such as the onlooker. Hunger, dirt or even camp routine were basically entrenched in the daily experiences of the human race, and as such were not interesting. Tragedy and heroism have to be equated with endeavour, which existence is patently not.

It is in this sense that the Great War has been lifted out of a normal concept of life, and given a tragic image. Thus, for example, one historian writes of the war unrolling "with the inevitability of a Greek tragedy,"[16] whilst another claims the battles had the structure and inevitability of "mannered Jacobean tragedies."[17] It is probable that the conscripts were heroes in this accepted tragic definition of the term. But investigating their military endeavours as counter-proof of their deserved heroic stature would be somewhat redundant, since it would simply raise them to the mythical level of the volunteers, without actually highlighting their singular attributes. By showing their bravery one would basically be applying an existing myth to a new population, rather than investigating the population itself. It is thus the purpose of this study to move away from tragic images to human realities, since personal identity is based upon the latter rather than the former.

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[15] Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, (Princeton University Press, 1957), p.41.

[16] Leon Wolff, In Flanders Fields, (Readers Union: Longmans, Green & Co., 1960), p.xxi.

[17] Denis Winter, Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War, (Penguin, 1987), p.16.

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To date three studies have made extensive use of the archive in the Imperial War Museum, but none of them makes reference to the conscripts. The first, The Great War and Modern Memory, was written by Paul Fussell in 1975. Though he undoubtedly examined the archive, his study is entirely distinct from the present one, for three reasons. Firstly, the book was researched in 1971, and since then the collection has increased quite significantly. Secondly, his study deals with the artistic output that memorialized the war, and it is in this context that the soldiers' private papers were used: "to see what the ordinary man has to say about it all, I have compared scores of amateur memoirs lodged in the collections of the Imperial War Museum."[18] Hence the author read these texts purely as literary narrative of secondary quality, calling upon their historical value only as substantiation of art. Moreover, the vast majority of the published memoirs and poems were written by officers of various ranks, and thus the writings of these "ordinary" men were used in reference to a very specific image of the war. This leads to the third point, which is that the author does not differentiate between the various populations of soldiers -- regulars, volunteers and conscripts -- and thus his study cannot properly reflect upon any of them.

The second book which draws upon many sources from the Imperial War Museum is Denis Winter's Death's Men.[19] Published in 1978, and researched over a few years, this "history from below" is an attempt to present the military career and war experience of the common soldiers. Yet this is also a work written within the accepted image of the war and its effects

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[18] P. Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory, (OUP, 1977), P.ix.

[19] Winter, op. cit.

upon British society. The opening two chapters are "The Kitchener armies form" and "The training of the 'Other Ranks';" whilst the remainder of the book follows this structure of a volunteer soldier's career in the army, with a discussion of attitudes at the end. Thus it is the perspective of the army as a Volunteer force which is presented here, from the opening sentence of the narrative: "The crucial decision which produced the greatest volunteer army Britain had ever put into the field ..."[20] The conscripts themselves are not mentioned in this book; whereas conscription is noted but once, basically as a chronological event and as proof of the value of the voluntary system:

> "Since about half a million men would have become eligible each year [from 1916] as they reached the military age, conscription had clearly been unable to unearth a significant number of dodgers."[21]

Mr Winter views the soldiers' war as a "shared experience,"[22] thus also not differentiating between them as men of separate military populations or civilian backgrounds. He also makes extensive use of the aforementioned published memoirs, alongside local histories, contemporary newspapers and rather dated secondary works on British society and the army, and weapons of the time. The narrative makes reference to the view points of all the men and the army, and thus appears to be "objective". But given the sources and general attitude employed by the author this objectivity is misleading since it is essentially based upon the image of the volunteer soldiers and their plight of heroism.

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[20] ibid. p.23.

[21] ibid, p.29.

[22] ibid, p.21.

Peter Simkins' Kitchener's Army[23] is the third and most recent study that incorporates a large part of the First World War collection in the archive. Unlike the previous works, it is a specific monograph on the subject of the volunteers, and thus makes use of their papers only. This is a work of military history with social contexts, and is specifically not a narrative of the soldiers' writings or an examination of their opinions. Thus it is the first to use the archive systematically in reference to a specific population, in a manner both distinct and complimentary to this dissertation. Simkins explains in great detail how the New Armies came into existence, and how the British army as an organization responded to this immense influx of men. His study ends with the commencement of conscription, hence the enlistment and training experiences of the conscripts discussed here are, to an extent, a continuation of his work.

These three monographs, alongside the great body of existing literature on the war, have produced a detailed image and explanation of the Volunteers' military experience and the army in which they enlisted. This study is an attempt to present another version of this experience, that of the conscripts. It does not, however, argue that the conscripts' experiences, and especially those discussed here, were substantially different from those recounted by volunteers. It is simply an attempt to find out what their experiences were, and, more importantly, how they transcribed them into the written word. For the emphasis is upon their perception of reality, rather than an objective definition of it; and the ultimate aim of the study is to analyse **these** texts that they wrote, and uncover the cultural identity embedded **within them**. As such, it is not a comparative research, for the experiences of the volunteers

[23] Peter Simkins, Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914-16, (MUP, 1988).

and officers are not being evaluated, since they are not the subject of this work; nor have a precisely defined selection of their writings been analysed in the method developed here. Thus they are, on the whole, mentioned only when these conscripts' version of their experiences differs from their better known and accepted account. If no comparison is offered in some places, it is simply because the two versions concur. Thus it must also be noted that this thesis does not attempt to argue that the conscripts were treated badly by the army because of their status, nor that the Volunteers received better treatment. The process of enlistment was different for both populations, but once any civilian actually became a soldier he appeared to be treated identically -- in accordance with the state of the war and the army at any given time.

The setting within which this examination is anchored is the war itself, and the specific framework is the British army, as the organization which effectively mediated between the war and the conscripts. As Ashworth noted, the progression of war also wrought the progression of bureaucratization, and nowhere can this be more applicable than conscription. In its abstract and political context this issue has been discussed at length, especially in a monograph by Keith Grieves.[24] He incorporates conscription into a thesis concerning the re-organization of Britain's overall manpower resources, and so highlights the bureaucratization that overcame the structure of government. No study, however, has shown the actual process of bureaucracy, as it evolved and became applicable to the individual conscript. This will be explained below. Moreover, as a secondary theme of this thesis the organization of the army will be examined, as it revealed itself to the conscripts. For as a recent researcher noted,

[24] K. Grieves, The Politics of Manpower, 1914-18, (MUP, 1988). See esp. ch. 2-4 and Conclusion, passim.

"Britain's small army was transformed literally overnight into a mass army requiring the sort of supplementary organization that would take years to evolve."[25] Thus within this context questions will be asked about the ability of the army to offer itself as a definitive support system. To an extent, this may be seen as a minor research into the identity of the wartime British army, as either an intentionalist or a functionalist organization.

The discussion of these conscripts' experiences will conclude with a chapter in which all these themes of existence, organization, bureaucracy and identity will be brought together. This will be an attempt to provide an answer to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter: What was the identity of those British conscripts whose writings are examined here with the aid of a novel methodology, who served on the Western front between 1916 and 1918?

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The structure of this dissertation revolves around the examination of these conscripts' experiences and identity. In Part I a summary of all the relevant background issues will be presented. Chapter 1, explaining the methodolgical background to this study, is of the greatest importance, for two reasons. Firstly, it embedds within it the innovation, and a large part of the original contribution of this work. Secondly, the entire narrative of Part II, the bulk of the thesis, emanates from it. The two historical chapters which follow are given as a context to this analysis of texts and, ultimately, identity. Following Donne's decree that "No man is an

[25] Robin W. Kilson, Calling Up the Empire: The British Military Use of Non-White Labour in France, 1916-1920, (Harvard University, PhD thesis, 1990), p.16.

island", they merely trace, in the broadest terms, the background to these men's existence as conscripts, both in political and bureaucratic terms. Their value is limited precisely to the information they depict, and they are not intended to make any claim beyond that, nor to raise any historical hypotheses or expectations -- social, economical, political or any other -- regarding the conscripts as a population. Part II, the bulk of the narrative, is devoted to the experiences of the conscripts, mostly in their own words. For as a result of the methodology applied here over one thousand full quotes, divided into subject matters of attitude and experience, have been used to create these chapters. The dissertation culminates in a discussion of these conscripts' cultural identity, as it emerges from the analysis of these texts, in accordance with the title of the work.

PART I: CONCEPT

We can study files for decades, but every so often
we are tempted to throw up our hands and declare
that history is merely another literary genre:
the past is autobiographical fiction pretending to
be a parliamentary report.

(Julian Barnes, Flaubert's Parrot)

> The study of man is the study of talk. Human society is an edifice spun out of the tenuous webs of conversation.[1]

Chapter One: Methods

This is a study in perception -- as a means to uncovering an identity. It is historical, in that it shows, from a very specifically defined vantage point, how a certain event happened at a given point of time in the past; thus it explains change over time. It is a presentation of events which occurred seventy years ago, by a population that experienced them, with the aid of the original personal documents they created. Yet the focus is upon the population and their means of presentation, rather than upon the events themselves. As such, it makes the historical investigation more complex, since the subject matter is not the tangible fact of event, but rather the intangible matters of perception and identity. However, the "task of the historian is always to make bricks without straw, to make what he believes are correct images of the past from an extremely imperfect sample of recorded data."[2]

In order to produce a certain image here, other disciplines were called upon, as a means of defining a conceptual approach, both to the subject and to the sources. Thus elements from the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis, in the Freudian sense, were applied; alongside works on the subjects of sociology, literary criticism and cultural analysis. However, this study does not rest specifically upon any of these disciplines. It is not, for example, a work

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[1] Kenneth Boulding, The Image, (University of Michigan Press, 1959), p.45.

[2] ibid. p.69.

of psycho-history or socio-history. Rather, it is an attempt to gain some insight, or knowledge, about a group of people. In this, the overall conceptual approach used here is somewhat akin to that presented by Kenneth Boulding in The Image:

> Knowledge has an implication of validity, of truth. What I am talking about is what I believe to be true; my subjective knowledge. It is this image which largely governs my behaviour. ... The image is built up as a result of all past experience of the possessor of the image. Part of the image is the history of the image itself.[3]

In this study the subjective knowledge imparted by the population of conscripts examined here, through their writings, is drawn into an image they had of themselves; and further, as it was perceived by the society in which they lived. As a general guiding rule, however, it must be noted that a study of perceptions can never be a study of absolute matter: "If we see perceptions as a form of contact and communion, then control over what is perceived is control over contact that is made, and the limitation and regulation of what is shown is a limitation and regulation of contact."[4] Establishing the limitation and regulation of the contact these conscripts made with their audiences is what may lead to their image, and hence identity. But in order to achieve this goal, one must first define a conceptual image of them, and hence their writings. In other words, the terms of reference within which this research was undertaken must be explained. Thus the following chapter is a discussion of definitions: of the conceptual approach to this research; of the conscripts as a population; and of their personal writings -- the source material used here. For a work of cultural and textual analysis must always commence from clear and strict definitions -- applicable to the work at hand -- marking the limitations of the analysis, as much as its possibilities.

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[3] ibid. p.7.

[4] Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, (Allen Lane, 1971), p.58.

The First World War Private Papers Collection

in the Imperial War Museum[5]:

The structure of the archive in the museum was a crucial factor in defining this population of conscripts, and indeed the overall approach to this research. The collection of Private Papers in the IWM today numbers 5,500 (one thousand running meters), of which approximately 3,000 are from the First World War. The basic methodological problem posed by this archive in reference to this study is that due to the documenting and cataloguing system used, the private papers of conscript soldiers do not appear as such in the catalogue.

The files of the First World War Private Papers Collection in the Museum are arranged in a subject index, basically according to theatres of war, each theatre being divided into groups of sequential years and campaigns. Thus, besides a very minor collection of papers grouped under "conscription," the material relevant to this study was lodged in the sections entitled "Western Front 1916", "Western Front 1917", "Western Front 1918", "Allied Retreat 1918" and "Allied Advance 1918".[6] In addition, the papers are classified according to references to action mentioned in the texts and not according to the year in which a soldier enlisted. This leads to the twofold problem of collections being relevant to a number of headings, and thus appearing; and the possibility of a soldier's enlistment being prior to 1916, whose papers

[5] Hence the Museum, or IWM.

[6] The papers grouped under the campaigns of the Somme, Ypres I, II, III and Passchendaele are merely cross-referenced from the main groups examined here.

reflect a period within 1916-1918 (e.g. a volunteer who enlisted in 1915 and only reached France in 1916, or even a volunteer from 1914 whose letters from 1917 alone survived).

The policy of the Documents Department at the IWM is to try and ascertain as much biographical data as possible on a soldier when a collection of his papers is acquired. However, if none is available from those who possessed the collection formerly, no effort will be made to establish the his background, military or civilian, beyond what is stated in the papers. The emphasis of the archive is on the military aspect of his life, and efforts will be concentrated on establishing the unit and regiment in which he served and the process of his career in such, when possible.

Definition of the term "conscripts" in this study:

The conscripts are conceptually differentiated from the other soldiers of the Great War simply by the Act of conscription. This legal device imposed a new sociological reality upon them, whilst also raising a psychological problem. The former aspect implies their removal from one social organization, that of civilians, into one alien to them, the army. This movement corresponds entirely with Goffman's depiction of individuals initiated into the world of total institutions, such as asylums:[7] "The recruit comes into the establishment with a conception of himself made possible by certain stable social arrangements in his home world. Upon

[7] Erving Goffman, Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of mental patients and other Inmates, (Penguin: Peregrine, 1987).

entrance, he is immediately stripped of the support provided by these arrangements."[8] By alienating the inmate from his previous concept of existence, from the outer elements of singular clothing to daily schedules of collective work and rest, as opposed to the personal and private ones of civilian life, a totally new identity is imposed upon him. A premise of this study is that the mental and physical framework of the British army, within which the conscripts existed, was a total institution -- as Goffman himself repeatedly shows through the examples he uses. The purpose of this research is therefore to establish how the conscripts viewed it, as a basis for their wartime identity.[9]

Once the conscripts were in the army, they had to make conceptual adjustments to their new environment, which was composed of unknown physical and social elements. Ultimately, they suffered a change of status: from being independent men they became enlisted men of Other Ranks. This status was a great shock, not only because of its lowly position in the range of army stati, but also due to the social composition within it:

> In large social establishments, individuals within a given status level are thrown together by virtue of the fact that they must co-operate in maintaining a definition of the situation toward those above and below them. Thus a set of individuals who might be dissimilar in important respects, and hence desirous of maintaining social distance from one another, find they are in a relation of enforced familiarity characteristic of team-mates engaged in staging a show.[10]

This description is applicable to all the civilians, volunteers or conscripts, who enlisted in the army during the war. What sets the latter population apart is the issue of motivation.

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[8] ibid. 24.

[9] For a full discussion of this issue see below Part II, "Identity and War".

[10] Goffman, The Presentation..., op. cit. p.73.

Voluntarism denotes, by definition, a positive and accepting attitude to the military framework as a means to achieving an ideological goal of victory. A volunteer wants to be in the army, even if its organization and his placement within it are alien and even repugnant to him. These considerations are not relevant to conscripts, since their personal opinion is not sought prior to the act of enlistment, which in their case is not a self induced act. Therefore the motivation of conscripts, in accepting the military framework and in fighting, is unclear. Whilst conscription does not necessarily contradict a positive motive of participation, such as patriotism, it cannot be equated with that of a volunteer.

Britain was the only power to enter the First World War with a volunteer army. All the other major participants on the continent conscripted large armies from the start, and thus the problem of conscripts' motivation was immensely relevant to them. The issue was broached due to the traumatic disorders suffered by many men, as a result of their exposure to the army and especially the experience of war. These have become known as 'shell shock' or 'war neurosis', yet at the time the source of these disorders was unclear. In Austria a dispute arose concerning the treatment of the afflicted men, who were initially diagnosed as suffering from "an organic impairment of the nervous system,"[11] and were thus sent out to rest in rural areas. But as the war progressed, and the number of mental casualties grew, the opinion amongst psychiatrists changed, and the symptoms were explained as an unconscious "malady of the will"[12] -- an escape into illness -- and thus malingering.[13] This shift was reflected

[11] Jose Brunner, "Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis and Politics During the First World War," paper presented at the Israeli Political Science Association, Tel Aviv University, May 1988, p.2.

[12] ibid. p.3.

in the treatment given to the men, which combined, amongst other measures, psychological inducement to patriotism and "therapeutic shocks" of electricity.

After the war, "much dissatisfaction was expressed in the Austrian Parliament about the handling of psychiatric casualties by military surgeons."[14] A Commission of enquiry was appointed, in which complaints from former mental patients against six military psychiatrists, reputed civilian practitioners who had enlisted for the duration of the war, were investigated. Freud was appointed to give his expert opinion, in a written report, on the electrical treatment of war neurosis, which he read out a public hearing of the Commission in October 1920. In it, he attempted to explain the difference between malingering, which is impelled by a conscious motive, and neuroses, which form around an unconscious motive. In the discussion which followed his reading, Freud showed the connection between the two:

> All neurotics are malingerers; they simulate without knowing it, and this is their sickness. We have to remember that there is a big difference between conscious refusal and unconscious refusal.[15]

In explaining the cause of the unconscious refusal, the neurosis, of mentally wounded soldiers Freud singled out conscription as a crucial element. For many men

> it was dreadful to have to submit to military treatment, and poor treatment by their superiors had an influence on many in our army and that of Germany. ... it is also true that we had a people's army, that men were forced into military service, that they

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[13] Shell shock was also debated amongst the British medical establishment throughout the war, and seemed to correspond in its directions to that in the Continent. See for example: War Shock, (London, 1917).

[14] Meyer S. Gunther and Harry Trosman, "Freud as Expert Witness; Wagner-Jauregg and the Problem of War Neuroses," in Annual of Psychoanalysis, Vol 2 (1974), p.4.

[15] ibid. p.6; pp. 4-9 are a full transcript of the oral discussion held in front of the commission.

> were not asked whether they liked to go to war, and that is why one has to understand that people wanted to escape [into illness].[16]

The effect of malingering was wrought since "in war neuroses the intention to stay sick is much stronger -- not for pleasure, but to escape military service."[17]

Freud basically presented "a conflict of motivation, i.e., the desire of the ego to preserve itself safely and comfortably versus the desire to do one's duty according to one's own or society's standards."[18] This conflict was applicable not only to those who suffered mental afflictions from the war, but to all the men who were conscripted throughout the warring states. In Britain the question of motivation was especially pertinent, since the option of volunteering was open to men aged over 18 for sixteen months, before the introduction of conscription in January 1916. Thus if an individual wanted to express his accepting attitude through personal enlistment, he could have done so. After this date all 18 year olds were conscripted, though some were returned to the labour force for munitions work; and as the Military Acts progressed, so were the older men. Whilst the 18 year olds are a singular group within the conscripts, in that they did not have the prior option of volunteering, it is quite possible that if voluntarism had continued the majority of enlistments would have been from within their age group. It has been shown that during the period of voluntarism in Britain young men, especially in the labour force, enlisted most.[19] Hence the question of motivation in conscripts in Britain, as applied to this younger group, was valid in the abstract sense; whereas for the

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[16] ibid. p.5.

[17] ibid. p.9.

[18] ibid. p.12.

[19] P.E. Dewey, "Military Recruiting and the British Labour Force during the First World War," The Historical Journal, 27, I (1984), pp. 210-11; passim.

older men, those who had the option of volunteering, the issue was much more real. These men could have volunteered, but did not -- for whatever reason.

For the purposes of this study, therefore, the conscripts as a broad population may be defined as a group of men of one nationality, from unknown but varied backgrounds, who were placed together within the confines of a total institution. Their placement was made possible due to the force of law, and not through their personal desire. As a result, their motivation in fulfilling the purpose of their placement, fighting a war, was unclear, and possibly negative -- due to a mental conflict of interest between self preservation and social standards.

Definition of the source materials:

This study concerns itself with three different types of sources: Diaries, letters and written accounts of British soldiers conscripted into the British army[20] between January 1916 and November 1918. "Soldiers" in this study being conscripts who were not commissioned officers.

The three types of sources, or texts, used in this study are historical in content, and literary, to a greater or lesser degree, in form. The content of each file is intensely personal, but due to the shared framework and existential circumstances the collection as a whole may present

[20] This does not include the Navy or the RFC.

I. Diary: Of the three types of sources diaries are the most personal, in that the writer commits to paper his life as he sees it at a certain point in time, for his own personal use in the future. He is creating memory for himself. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines "diary" as a "daily record of events or transactions, a journal; specifically a daily record of matters affecting the writer personally ... A book prepared for keeping a daily record; also, applied to calendars containing daily memoranda."

The diaries used in this study answer to all these criteria, each in differing manners and degrees. Army orders forbade soldiers from the ranks to keep diaries when serving overseas, in case these fell into enemy hands. Therefore diaries were not available for purchase in France or Belgium. This means that the decision to keep a journal in "a book prepared for keeping a daily record" must have been made by the soldier before he left British shores (unless he were to have one sent to him from home, but this may have been kept from him by the army authorities). None of the diaries in this study commence prior to a soldier's enlistment, the first entries being made either on the day of induction into the army or (more commonly) upon crossing to the war zone. A number of soldiers started a journal only once they were in France, and since diaries were unattainable they kept their chronicles in notebooks, army books or even upon sheets of paper.

Most of the diaries cover only certain periods within a soldier's career (usually expiring with the last day of the diary, unless extended onto notebooks etc.), and are often missing days, weeks or even months of entries. The types of entries also range widely, from a slightly elaborated timetable (e.g. "January 12, 1917 "parade 3 o'clock am. entrain 5.30. Reach

Southampton 12 noon. Embark 6 o'clock PM."[21]) to a full narrative involving events and characters (e.g. "July 9, 1917. Major says we get no pay till he finds out who made a hole in a water trough which the officers pinched from the men, so there is a general opinion of "no pay, no work"."[22])

This immense variety in the form and content of the diaries suggest that they were written by men unused to keeping a diary in their civilian life, who also often lacked adequate time to do so whilst in action. However, as they viewed their military service, especially overseas, as a unique experience, isolated from their normal concept of life, it became worthy of preservation for future reference in the form of a chronicle. Unfortunately, many of the entries are brief and not very informative. Nevertheless, the fact that the diaries were written in unliterary forms for personal use provides a unique insight into the true feelings, thoughts and attitudes of common conscript soldiers in active service. For by being written "in 'private' they affect to escape preexisting categories, to tell the 'truth' of experience."[23]

Therefore a diary in the context of this study would be a chronological text of varying length and detail, created by a writer unused to this mode with limitations imposed upon his free time, who wished to preserve an irregular epoch in his life. In other words, a conscious preservation of memory for future reference.

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[21] Bishop E D, IWM 77/111/1.

[22] Acklam W R, IWM 83/23/1.

[23] Felicity A. Nussbaum, The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth Century England, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p.28.

II. Letter: The general definition of "letter" as given by the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary is simply "something written," which adequately covers the diverse collection of texts preserved in the Imperial War Museum as letters. As with diaries, here also one is faced with infinite combinations of form and content. The external form of a letter was basically dependant upon the availability of paper and time, the soldier's location, and his writing skills. Indeed, a letter in this collection may be a few words scribbled in a trench just before going into battle, on a torn scrap of paper; a note upon a page out of an army book; a complete narrative written upon the back of a printed army form; or just a letter in its acceptable form of words put together upon notepaper.

The definition of the content of these letters is a far more complex task. This type of source may be termed intimate rather than personal, in that it was created by the writer for a specific audience. Yet in a perverse manner one must also consider that the soldier probably had the least control over this type of source. On the one hand his freedom of expression was limited due to the presence of the censor, in addition to the mental obstacles felt by soldiers in communicating with civilians. On the other hand the soldier also lost physical control over a letter once it passed to the postal services, in contrast to a diary that always remained in his possession or an account written in the comfort of his home.

Thus the content of any given letter was influenced by three major factors: censorship, the intended audience and the soldier himself; the latter two usually being combined. Censorship prohibited any explicit reference by the soldier to his location, expected movements (in the

rare event he knew of them), or military actions.[24] Therefore no letter could convey the exact military experiences of the writer to the reader.

The army authorities regularly distributed Field Postcards[25] which all soldiers in the ranks had to fill in by order. Thus unless a major upheaval such as the Spring Retreat or Summer Advance of 1918 made this impossible, most soldiers managed to assure their families' of their existence. Since a Field Postcard could not be sent to anyone outside a soldier's family, a letter in this context would therefore be an optional form of communication adopted by a soldier who wished to preserve a more personal contact with his civilian life. Such a letter may be sent to family, friends, lovers, employers etc.

The issue of communicating with a specific audience is crucial to the letter writer. Moreover, unlike an official letter which may be addressed to a specific yet personally unknown reader, the letters examined in this study were created by a writer who had a personal relationship with his readers, be they an individual or an explicitly defined small group such as a family. Moreover, it must be noted that in communication "each participant is expected to suppress his immediate heartfelt feelings, conveying a view of the situation which he feels the others will be able to find at least temporarily acceptable."[26] In the case of a diary the soldier could use terms, or codes understood by him alone, whereas written accounts were created for a general audience and thus open to interpretation. But in letters the soldier had to use terms,

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[24] For a full discussion of censorship see below: Part II, "The Institution and War".

[25] A multiple choice postcard printed by the army, upon which the soldier merely had to encircle the relevant information (e.g. "I am well" or "I received your last letter" etc.). No extra message could be added in handwriting by the soldier.

[26] Goffman, The Presentation..., op. cit. p.8.

or codes, which would be understood by his audience within the context of their relationship. In other words, the reader could understand the letter only if it contained "one or more shared codes of communication between sender and receiver" since reading is "a process of decoding what has by various means been encoded in the text."[27]

In this light, the content of a soldier's letter may be seen as a compilation of his two identities: a civilian and a soldier. In the first instance it may refer to people, places and events which formed the mental and physical landscape of the soldier as he was prior to his conscription. In creating letters of this kind the soldier is drawing upon memory, both of his own and that shared by the letter's addressee. In other words, communication is established by the soldier crossing back into the civilian world of the reader. If, in the second instance, the soldier wished to share his new identity with a civilian reader, he still had to do so in terms understood by the latter. Hence military experiences in the war zone had to be transferred into normative civilian codes in order to be understood by a civilian reader. Since this was very difficult, most of the letters in this study dwell upon attitudes and existential experiences such as hunger and cold, far more than military and combatting experiences.

The definition of a letter in this study would therefore be a text of any length created by a soldier in order to communicate with a specific audience. The content may relate to both his civilian and military existence, in accordance with terms imposed upon him by the army censor and the prevailing codes of civilian existence and understanding. In reference to memory, these letters are memory being created by one for the use of others.

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[27] Susan R. Suleiman, "Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism" in S.R. Suleiman and I. Crosman, The Reader in the Text, (Princeton University Press, 1980), p.8.

III. Written Account: The written accounts examined in this study may vary between one handwritten page recounting a single episode or period within the military career of a conscript, to several typed volumes covering his life. There are three salient points to be considered in defining this type of source. In the first place that accounts were written after the event, and not in its midst or shortly afterwards, as is the case with letters and diaries. Thus with the aid, and as a result of memory created in the near or distant past. In the second place the motivation for creating an account is most influential in determing the form and content it may take. And in the third place that these texts were written for a wide and mostly unknown audience.

Dictionaries devote much space to defining "account." Webster's Third New International Dictionary equates a written account with "a statement or explanation of one's activities, conduct, and discharge of responsibilities." In short, an account is a combination of self reckoning and a subjective attempt at "setting the record straight." Many of these men had attempted to communicate and present an account of themselves during the event itself. Yet many of their experiences and activities were untenable in their own eyes, and thus unpresentable to civilian society. "We find that there are many performances which could not have been given had not tasks been done which were physically unclean, semi-illegal, cruel, and degrading in other ways; but these disturbing facts are seldom expressed during a performance. ... we tend to conceal from our audience all evidence of 'dirty work'."[28]

[28] Goffman, The Presentation..., op. cit. pp. 38-9.

Writing an account is thus a means of cleansing oneself; a confession of sorts. Foucault claims that since the Middle Ages

> The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement ... a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation.[29]

In the context of this study it is to the "sin" of participating in the First World War. Freud claims in an essay written during the war that civilians recoiled from "the brutality shown by individuals [soldiers] whom ... one would not have thought capable of such behaviour."[30] In time of battle man reverts to his most "primitive impulses", which are an "expression of the forces in the mind."[31] But after the event the soldier as a civilian had to once more live with himself within a society that basically rejected his actions, even though it imposed them upon him through conscription. Writing an account could thus be a means of confessing his deeds to society, and of explaining them.

Accounts are the least personal of the three sources discussed here. Though a narrative of one's life, often including his innermost thoughts, these texts were created for a wide and usually unknown audience. Therefore in order to be understood the writer had to transform his narrative into terms, or codes, acceptable to a reader who has no knowledge of the event, nor even of the period. In addition the writer of an account, unlike a diary or a letter, created the text at a leisure which enabled him to edit his narrative. Moreover, the writers of these

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[29] Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, (Penguin, 1984), pp. 61-2.

[30] Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death (1915)" op. cit., p.67.

[31] ibid. p.73.

accounts were also influenced by the consequences of the war and the events which followed it.

David Vincent claims that working class biographers all "shared three basic assumptions: that the identity of the individual could only be understood in the context of a specific culture, that only those who had lived in that culture could properly know it, and that even the poorest and most despised section of society possessed its own history, its own convention, and its own morality."[32] Though not all the accounts in this study were created by working class men, all these assumptions are true to them since the "poorest and most despised section of society" in the army is that composed of men from the ranks, regardless of their personal background or class. Thus part of their motivation in writing an account was to preserve the history of the common soldier, both in face of the "official" histories, and for the knowledge of future generations.

The historical importance of these texts is immense, both as a comparison to the immediate events and memory of the diaries and letters, and also as a personal evaluation of changes through time. "The autobiography presents not just a record but an evaluation of experience ... As he [the writer] selects, organises and weighs his memories, he seeks to establish the intricate relationship between his own life-cycle and the period of history covered by his account."[33]

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[32] Burnett, Vincent, et. al., The Autobiography of the Working Class, op. cit. p.xvi.

[33] ibid. p.xxi.

A written account is therefore not only what the writer recalls, but rather a subjective selection of memory influenced by time. It is written for the benefit of an unknown audience upon which the writer wishes to impress his interpretation of events for future preservation.

The Methodological Approach:

A general problem in reading texts of any kind, is that of representation. In any form of communication there is always a dichotomy between the expression given, and that given off; between expression and impression.[34] With the written word the problem is even greater, since "we have no direct means of transcribing sensations, emotions, or feelings except through the crowded channels of symbolic representation."[35] In other words, the texts discussed here are all representations of life, within the given contexts and constraints which will be discussed below. As such, they cannot, and should not be read literally:

> In general ... the representation of an activity will vary in some degree from the activity itself and therefore inevitably misrepresent it. And since the individual will be required to rely on signs in order to construct a representation of his activity, the image he constructs, however faithful to the facts, will be subject to all the disruptions that impressions are subject to.[36]

It is therefore clear that regardless of the content of these written works, they can only serve for the creation of a subjective account. Taking an analogy from the field of statistics, it is possible to say that despite a systematic examination of an entire section of the archive, this

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[34] Goffman, The Presentation..., op. cit. p.4.

[35] Boulding, op. cit. p.65.

[36] Goffman, The Presentation..., op. cit. p.57.

is a conceptually biased sample. This element, more than any other, informs the approach of this study. Using these texts for the depiction of a general image of the war, or even one complimentary to an accepted image of it, would be an incorrect reading of them; and one, moreover, which would do an injustice to their creators. They were not produced on an objective or a comparative basis, but rather as personal, subjective statements. In this light, the historical value of the texts does not lie in their factual data, but rather in the manner in which it is presented from the writers' vantage point.

Examining personal texts thus facilitates a search for the person behind them -- and their identity. In these collections each individual had an image of himself, that was continuously being synthesized with the experiences he gained in his military capacity -- from training through to combat. In order to compile a collective image, each text, or personal collection, was read separately, and documented as such. However, each text was also read from a collective perspective, and documented within sixty categories of shared expression and experience. In this way, each sentence of each document could, and often was, of value in several ways. For example, the following paragraph was documented in four different categories of shared experience:

> Sunday services behind the front line were "conducted by a dreary man in officer's uniform, plus a white dog-collar. He would ask God to look after us and biff the enemy, while only a few miles away an equally worthy, or unworthy, German priest was no doubt asking God to do for them all the things that our man was requesting for us. We had, after all, been sent here by a responsible government to kill Germans and they had been sent likewise by their leaders. If we happened to be in the trenches on a Sunday the biffing went on just the same as on any other day. Surely we were putting God in an impossible situation."[37]

[37] Abraham A J, IWM P.191; p.44.

These sentences provide information on the organization, content and importance of religious services in the British Expiditionary Force in France (compulsory Church parade every Sunday, with a "war inspiring" sermon); on this soldier's attitude to the Germans (a country similar to Britain, with soldiers placed in a situation identical to his own); on his attitude to the war (initiated by "responsible governments" in order to kill people of identical stature on both sides; within the overall context of this collection, the words were probably meant as ironical -- especially with the reference to putting God in an impossible situation); and finally language (sniping, shooting and daily trench warfare are "biffing").

By reading and documenting each text in this way, every category of experience and attitude became a small data-base, which, when arranged in a logical manner evolved into a narrative told by these conscripts, in their own words. The order of presentation was, in the first instance, usually chronological and factual, followed by discussions of opinion and attitude. Thus for example, a category such as clothing would eventually be presented as: the overall collection of garments a soldier would have access to, the frequency with which they were changed, their condition, and ultimately the conscripts' opinion on all these issues. All of this data, however, would be elicited from their writings only, since the purpose of the study is to show their perspective and cognizance of an issue, and not the ideal one presented in secondary sources. In this method of research, analysis and presentation the personal element of each narrative was preserved, which informed the collective image that began to emerge. At the point in which the image of experience was eventually established -- the definition of identity became possible. Thus the logic behind the overall organization of this dissertation becomes clear, in that it first collates experience into an image, and then presents an identity.

Chapter Two: Conscription in Britain, 1901-1918

This chapter will depict the background to the issue of conscription, from some of the existing literature, in an attempt to present the most important aspects of the issue. The only significance of this chapter is in its attempt to explain the ultimate existence of a conscript population in the British army, alongside a volunteer one. In other words, it investigates the broad *materia*, the wider context, of the population of conscripts discussed in this dissertation, but no more than that.

The international political background:

Britain was the only major power to enter World War I with a force composed of its small regular army, mostly dispersed throughout the four corners of the Empire, and a "part time" Territorial Army. In all, it mustered approximately 700,000 men, of which half were not immediately available for service. In comparison, Germany, Russia and France each fielded conscript armies of millions from the very start, replacing their losses with yet more conscripts as the killing progressed.

Britain's interpretation of foreign affairs, especially those European, and its role within them as an independent yet influential force led to this situation. Pre-war planning was mainly based upon economic precepts: as a dominant financial force Britain would become banker to the Allies; and as the nation that "ruled the waves" its almighty navy would impose a blockade upon the enemy nations, especially Germany, thus starving them into submission. "The economic planning conducted by the Committee of Imperial defence before 1914 was not designed to mobilize the economy for war but to prevent the outbreak of war causing

economic collapse."[1] This opinion was current amongst many, not least the Director of Ship Requisitioning during the war, Lord Salter. He noted that it "was contemplated that Britain's real contribution would be naval, industrial and financial, the Navy keeping the seas open against cruiser attack for Allied imports and trade, and denying them to the enemy."[2] This was a policy of "business as usual" in which Britain would retain her pre-war economy and population more or less intact, basically at the expense of all the other belligerents.[3]

In general, any proposed war was deemed to be short and contained in terms of space and manpower. Conscription was therefore considered costly and unnecessary since Britain did not intend to field a large-scale army, comparable to those gathered by the other warring nations. This strategy, however, had not properly accounted for the complicated entanglement of international accords and agreements that eventually led most of the nations of Europe to war -- or of Britain's role within it. Thus it has been noted that even in 1914 most soldiers and civilians were not properly aware of Britain's commitment to France.[4] Nor did this strategy envisage the novel nature of modern warfare which entailed a much prolonged and sustained effort in terms of manpower and ammunition.

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[1] David French, British Strategy and War Aims, 1914-1916, (Allen & Unwin, 1986), p.15.

[2] Lord Salter, Memoirs of a Public Servant (London, 1961), pp. 73-4; quoted in Robin W. Kilson, Calling up the Empire..., op. cit., p. 18.

[3] For a full discussion of this theory see: D. French, British Economic and Strategic Planning, 1905-1915, (Allen & Unwin, 1982).

[4] Theodore Ropp, "Conscription in Great Britain, 1900-1914: A Failure in Civil-Military Communications?" Military Affairs, 20 (1956), p.75.

The force of events quickly made its impact upon British policy makers, and in turn upon the nation. Within a conceptual framework that had barely adjusted to the realities of modern warfare, a call went out for volunteers. Up to January 1916 an impressive volunteer army was raised, the only one of its kind in Europe, comprising over 2 million men. Yet this endeavour was still undertaken within the pre-war concept of Britain's role in the war: "Between December 1915 and April 1916 the government conducted a protracted and agonized debate in which they tried to balance the risks of a complete continental commitment against those of alienating the allies by continuing to wage the war on the limited liability principles."[5] When universal compulsory service was therefore enforced in Britain, it was seen as the only viable means of perpetuating and eventually winning the war. In other words, the introduction of conscription signified Britain's final departure from its concept of magnificent isolation and minimal participation in the continental war.

The domestic political background:

The Boer War placed the issue of conscription on the political, and thus ultimately the public agenda in Britain. In this war the British army, despite an eventual victory, displayed severe shortcomings that amounted to a military failure. Both within and without Parliament voices were raised in demand for a thorough reform of the British military forces, and even compulsory service of some kind. Putting army reform to one side[6], conscription posed two

[5] French, British Strategy..., op. cit. p. 159.

[6] Army reforms were introduced by R.B. Haldane as Secretary of State for War. Between the years 1905-1912 he engineered a series of changes in the organization of the army, though its size and the options for peace-time recruiting were minimally affected. However, these reforms are viewed as crucial in the development of the Edwardian army, and have thus been widely discussed elsewhere. See for example: David French, British Economic and Strategic

major problems to the Liberal-Edwardian frame of mind. The first was financial: A national service scheme of any kind would have meant a huge increase in the army budget, and hence an unacceptable drain upon the capitalist-mercantile economy of turn of the century Britain. The second was conceptual, in that conscription was viewed as an imposition upon the individual's civil rights, as well as a significant break with centuries of collective tradition and a decisive step towards militarism.[7] Many "believed that compulsory military service epitomized all that was worst in German society and the very thing which they were fighting against."[8] But it may be argued that this objection to compulsion was actually hollow, in that forms of militarism, such as membership in the Volunteer Force, were widely spread throughout Edwardian society. Anne Summers has presented the thesis that British militarism before the war was denied expression in existing political institutions, and thus became a popular movement associated with religion. As such, it was, "perhaps, an integral part of the Liberal political culture of the country; it was also integral to much of Anglican and Nonconformist Christianity. For these reasons it became a popular cause, and a peculiarly British one."[9] In other words, it is possible that British militarism existed, but not as an organized political or state endeavour which could be equated with Prussianism.

Planning, 1905-1915, op. cit.; Ian F. Beckett and Keith Simpson (eds.), A Nation in Arms: A social study of the British Army in the First World War, (Manchester University Press, 1985); Peter Simkins, Kitchener's Army: The raising of the New Army 1914-16, op. cit.

[7] Avner Offer, The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation, (OUP, 1989), p.328.

[8] French, British Strategy..., p.117.

[9] Anne Summers, "Militarism in Britain before the Great War," in History Workshop Journal, (No.2 (1976), pp. 104-23), p.105.

The pre-war parliamentary debates on national service were therefore persistent, yet in light of these obstacles they were doomed to failure. Though the predominantly Tory pro-conscriptionist lobby slowly gained adherents in the political arena, the majority of MP's, in their representative role, still felt that the British public rejected the concept of compulsory service. Moreover, "there was no 'military' opinion on the issue."[10] The higher echelons of the army never openly requested conscription, as a matter of military necessity or planning, and the question never became one of absolute necessity that could sway parliament.

Outside parliament the conscription controversy was dominated by the activities of the National Service League, which was founded in 1902 in order to create a popular basis for its namesake. Though headed by the aging war hero Lord Roberts, who was much admired in every social stratum, the League never gained massive support[11] since its appeal was to the higher strata of society. However, by August 1914 it had a significant network of branches and the support of well known Tory figures, in addition to its own journal, A Nation in Arms (previously the National Service Journal). Despite such achievements the League never managed to bring about a significant political conversion to the cause of compulsory military service. And thus in the decade preceding the First World War ideological principle based upon economic considerations reigned supreme, and the anti-conscriptionist lobby consistently won any debate on the issue.

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[10] Ropp, op. cit. p.75.

[11] Upon the outbreak of war the membership of the League was estimated at 250,000 (R.J.Q.Adams & P.P. Poirier, The Conscription Controversy in Great Britain, 1900-18, (Macmillan, 1987), p.11).

Public opinion on conscription was formed upon considerations not leading directly from ministerial estimates. Though the principle and tradition of liberalism and civil rights was undoubtedly crucial, this was also the period in which the "common man" was becoming susceptible to another major influence: the popular press. One of the features of this form of communication was its concern with peripheral or disjointed subjects, which were often removed out of context and described in menacing tones. Thus whilst the Times and the liberal Manchester Guardian reported on the conscription debate from afar and mostly within the confines of political interests, the innovative Daily mail, which had "the largest circulation of any newspaper ever before,"[12] alongside other exponents of the new "headliner" tabloids had no such scruples[13]. The issue of conscription was placed in the context of the German military threat, which was inflated by Lord Northcliffe and his editors to menacing proportions. As such, national service was portrayed as a logical necessity that was being denied the country by politicians.

It is therefore apparent that long before compulsory military service became a reality in England, the case had been squarely set before all elements of British society and public opinion, and in a surprisingly positive way.[14] Moreover, though the genteel National Service League actively campaigned for its introduction, it was the coarse new press that prepared the

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[12] Cate Haste, Keep the Home Fires Burning: Propaganda in the First World War, (Allen Lane, 1977), p.8.

[13] Another pre-war example is food supply in a future war which also received similar treatment, therefore becoming "one of the "fads" that animated the middle classes." (Avner Offer, "The Working Classes, British Naval Plans and the Coming of the Great War", Past and Present, No. 107, (May 1985); p.210.)

[14] Cate Haste (op. cit.) developes the thesis that the tabloid press in its advocacy of conscription in the years 1900-1914 mounted a campaign that amounted to propaganda.

common man for the eventuality of conscription. As a result of these combined efforts, however, it cannot be claimed that the British public, in all its strata, had not been presented with positive and consistent arguments for conscription. In some ways, therefore, tradition had been broken with at least a decade before the first conscript received his "call up" papers.

Conscription in War:

The outbreak of war in August 1914 forced the issue of compulsory service to the very forefront of national life, thereby lowering it from the lofty realms of principle and ideology to those of military manpower and national necessity. The initial burst of mass voluntarism that characterised the first two months of the war were followed by a steady decline in the numbers of men willing to put themselves voluntarily at the service of King and Country. Much has been written about the recruiting efforts under the voluntary system, yet it must be noted that the this system actually reached its peak in September 1914, with an immense 462,901 recruits[15]. By February 1915 the monthly recruiting figures had dropped below 100,000, and continued throughout the year in a downward spiral.

In May 1915 the so called "Shell Scandal" broke, exposing severe shortcomings in the British war economy and military organization; and their combined abilities to sustain an adequately equipped army on the battlefield. Thus aside from a growing failure to secure recruits, it became clear that a basic flaw of voluntarism was its lack of method as far as the economy and shell production were concerned. A plan of economic reform therefore had to ensure the reform of manpower allocation. The first step in this direction was the administration of a

[15] Simkins, op.cit. p.104.

National Register in August 1915 -- as a means of identifying the existing sources and allocation of manpower. In its wake the option of compulsory service seemed to come much closer to realization, since any major manpower reform would have to enforce conscription of some sort -- as a means of securing both industrial and military manpower. Liberal leaders, however, still recoiled from the ideology of compulsion. "Gilbert Murray, scholar and Asquithian, equating what he saw as an attack on Liberalism with the debasement of political standards, feared lest Britain become European and Prussian."[16] This attitude was coupled with an insistent, but not necessarily well-founded fear of popular revolt at such a measure. Hence Parliament went into recess in the summer of 1915 without having reached any decision.

Upon reconvening in September it was clear that a conscription Bill of some kind was expected. But yet again events took an indecisive turn with the appointment of Lord Derby as Director of Recruiting. He was given the twofold task of generating sufficient troops for the army, within the confines of the voluntary system; and of doing so in a way which would ensure that young, single men would be taken before the older, married men. What evolved was a personal canvass based upon the returns of the National Register, in which all British men[17] available for military service between the ages of 18 and 41 were asked to attest their willingness to serve in the army. Those who responded positively were attested and sent home, under the understanding that they could be summoned to the Colours with two weeks

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[16] Michael Fry, "Political Change in Britain, August 1914 to December 1916: Lloyd George Replaces Asquith: The Issues Underlying the Drama," The Historical Journal, 31, 3 (1988), p.619.

[17] Due to political tensions it was decided to exclude Ireland from this scheme, and from the later conscription Acts.

notice. The returns of the canvass were divided into 46 groups, according to ascending age and marital status, thus making it possible to summon single, younger men before married men.

The results of the Scheme, however, were disappointing: of the 2,179,231 single men noted in the Register, only 1.15 million attested their willingness, of whom 318,533 were actually available for service as both medically fit and in an unstarred occupation. Attestation amongst married men was much higher since they were publicly promised, by the prime minister, that single men would be taken first. Yet even this group produced only 403,921 fit and unstarred men, out of a total 2,832,210 available.[18] Thus the Derby Scheme did not secure the voluntary services of the majority of British manhood, though it did introduce a degree of method and system yet unknown to the recruiting efforts in Britain. But by Christmas 1915 it became clear that the introduction of conscription was unavoidable.

The Military Service Acts:

On January 5, 1916 The Liberal prime minister, Herbert Asquith proposed a Bill in the House of Commons, which would eventually lead to universal compulsory military service for all British men. This, the first Military Service Act, was to be applied only to unmarried men and widowers without children or dependents, between the ages of 18 and 41. Unmarried men engaged in work of national importance, or those who were the sole supporters of a household were to be excluded; as were men with medical disabilities and conscientious objectors -- who

[18] Figures from Lord Derby's report to the Cabinet, reproduced in Adams & Poirier, op. cit. p.135.

could apply to the military tribunals detailed by the Derby Scheme. Indeed, the entire Bill was suggested as a consequence of the Derby Scheme, and within the terms of reference laid out by it, and not as a proposal for conscription. In his speech, Asquith claimed that

> "in view of the results of Lord Derby's campaign, no case has been made out for general compulsion. ... This Bill is confined to a specific purpose -- the redemption of a promise [to enlist the unmarried men first] publicly given by me in this House in the early days of Lord Derby's campaign."[19]

The Bill was passed in the Commons on January 12, 1916, and received the Royal Assent on January 27. In principle, Parliament had, for the first time, enforced conscription upon a section of its male citizens.

From its inception this "Bachelor's Bill", as it became known, proved to be inadequate in providing sufficient military manpower. "The explanation is not difficult to understand: voluntary enlistment had ... virtually ceased. Married attestees, under the Derby Scheme, were not yet being called, and the combined figures of bachelor attestees and conscripts were insufficient to meet the demands of the Army."[20] By March 1916 it was clear that this intermediate measure was, in the words of Sir William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, a "farce and a failure."[21] In a memo to the Cabinet he claimed that "Of the 193,891 men called up under the Military Service Act no fewer than 57,416 have failed to appear."[22]

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[19] Quoted in: Denis Hayes, Conscription Conflict: The Conflict of Ideas in the Struggle For and Against Military Conscription in Britain between 1901-1939, (The Sheppard Press, 1949), p.201.

[20] Adams & Poirier, op. cit. p.148.

[21] French, British Strategy..., p.187.

[22] Memo to the Cabinet by Sir William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, on 21 March, 1916. Quoted in D. Lloyd George, War Memoirs, (Odhams Press Ltd, 1938)

Extended debates, both in Cabinet and in the Commons, eventually led to a new Bill being introduced on May 3, 1916 -- in which it was proposed that compulsion be applied to all men, regardless of marital status, between the ages of 18 and 41. The Bill, which was to be an extension of the existing Military Service Act, was passed on the following day, by a huge majority of 328 to 36, and received Royal Assent on May 25, 1916. Universal conscription thus became a fact in Britain.

Throughout the remaining months of 1916 and 1917 the schedules of reserved occupations specified in the Act were revised four times. In July 1917 another Military Service Act (Conventions with Allied States) was passed, allowing for the conscription of British subjects residing abroad, and of Allied citizens residing in Britain, under the same terms specified in the original Act. In February 1918 an entirely new Military Service Act (II) was introduced. The age limit was raised to 50, with a proviso for the conscription of men up to the age of 56 and the extension of compulsion to Ireland, if the need arose in either case. Once again the schedules of reserved occupations were completely redrawn, also giving the Ministry of National Service, formed in November 1917, the authority to cancel exemptions granted on occupational grounds. In July 1918 an amendment was made to the Act, with regard to this latter clause, whereby the schedule for the minimum age of exemption in most protected occupations was raised to 23. The aggregate result of all the legislative efforts from January 1916 was the conscription of 2,504,183 men into the British Army -- thus over half of all the men recruited during the Great War were conscripts.

Vol.I, p.438.

> Looking backward, there is no doubt at all that we should have been able to organise the nation for war far more effectively in 1914, and bring the conflict to a successful issue far more quickly and economically, if at the very outset we had mobilised the whole nation -- its man-power, money, materials and brains -- on a war footing and bent all our resources to the task of victory on rational and systematic lines. Towards the end, something approaching this condition was in fact reached, but there had intervened a long and deplorably extravagant prelude of waste and hesitation.[1]

This chapter explains the background to conscripting -- thus the physical existence of conscripts in the British army. Depicted from the bureaucratic point of view, it attempts to explain how the technical transition from civilian to conscript, in the broadest of terms, was wrought. It is not intended to reflect anything beyond this contextual explanation of the conscripts' placement in the army.

Conscription was undoubtedly a crucial element in the attempt to rationalise "the whole nation". Yet between the Military Service Acts enabling compulsory service and the eventual conscription of over two and a half million men lay the administrative act of conscripting an individual. To date the historiographic literature has not addressed this issue in detail.[2] The

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[1] D. Lloyd George, War Memoirs, op. cit. Vol.I, p.428.

[2] Some of the works referring to the issue have been cited in the above chapters. But most books dealing with the political arena in Britain, the problems of manpower, and strategy throughout the Great War discuss conscription as a pivotal issue, without reflecting upon its actual implementation. See for example: Adams & Poirier, The Conscription Controversy, op. cit.; Hayes, Conscription Conflict, op. cit.; French, British Economic and Strategic Planning 1905-1915, op. cit., British Strategy and War Aims, 1914-1916, op. cit.; J.M. Winter, The Great War and the British People, (Macmillan, 1985), Part I; K. Grieves, The Politics of Manpower, 1914-1918, op. cit.; Wilson, The Myriad Faces of War, (The Polity Press, 1986), Part 9, 11; B. Waites, A Class Society at War, England 1914-1918, (Berg, 1987).

conscripted soldier has been viewed, if at all, as a direct product of the Military Service Acts. But little thought has been given as to how the law was transcribed into a bureaucratic system which eventually delivered "call-up" notices to the homes of specific citizens liable for conscription. The evolvement of this process from the official view-point will be explored in this chapter; whereas the opening chapter of Part II will present these conscripts view of it. The combination of both viewpoints may assist in understanding yet another aspect of the re-organization of the British state in the last three years of the Great War.

The National Register:

The basic flaw of voluntarism from the administrative perspective was its lack of system. Each volunteer decided upon his own enlistment, and thus a qualified engineer or a miner could remove himself from the workforce, regardless of whether he would be of more use to the war economy if he remained in his civilian occupation. This was possible not only because of the personal nature of volunteering, but also because there was no contemporary data on the population as a whole against which an individual's value could be assessed. Therefore the first step towards a system of conscription, or any other state-wide system of manpower allocation, had to be a national survey of the population in its entirety. And, moreover, one which would reflect upon the skills and size of the available workforce. For in order to single out an individual male citizen for conscription, or his placement in a reserved occupation, his existence and availiablity for service had first to be established. The

National Register of August 15, 1915 was compiled to do this, as "another step on the path toward Dilution, toward the more efficient distribution of labour."[3]

The National Registration Act was passed on July 15, 1915, and called for the registration of every citizen and resident of England, Scotland[4] and Wales, male and female, between the ages of 15 and 65. Each person was to be supplied with a form regarding

> (a) name; place of residence; age; whether single, married or widowed; number of dependents...; profession or occupation (if any), and nature of employers business; ...
>
> (b) Whether the work on which he is employed is work for or under any Government Department.
>
> (c) Whether he is skilled in ... any work.[5]

A central registration authority was made responsible for supplying each local registration authority with forms, whilst the latter was to ensure their distribution, collection and full completion. A certificate of registration would then be supplied to each person, who would subsequently become personally responsible for notifying the local registration authority of his removal to a new address within 28 days of its occurrence.

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[3] R.J.Q. Adams, Arms and the Wizard: Lloyd George and the Ministry of Munitions, 1915-1916, (Cassell, 1978), p.101. Despite the vehement denials of politicians, it appears that the notion of compulsory military service edged towards realization some five months before it became law. For example, Walter Long, President of the Local Government Board, claimed not to agree that "compulsory registration means compulsory service, and I am strongly of opinion that the ultimate object in view can to a large extent be secured given compulsory registration, without resort to any further compulsion either for the army or for industrial purposes." (11 June 1915, CAB 37/129/35; quoted in Adams & Poirier, op. cit. p.96.) For a full discussion of the political debate, see for example: idem, ch.6.

[4] The Act was administered in Scotland by a separate set of authorities, parallel to those in England and Wales. A proviso was added for the application of the Act to Ireland, but this was never enforced.

[5] "National Registration Act, 1915" in 1914-16 Public General Acts, (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1917), Ch. 60.

The task of compiling a register was allocated to the "Registrar-General, acting under the directions of the Local Government Board."[6] The logic behind this coupling was that from the start of the war recruitment had been organized on a local basis, hence the authority of the latter body; whereas any data pertaining to the population was within the jurisdiction of the Registrar-General. This office was also responsible for conducting the national census every ten years, which was another form of population accounting. The previous census had been compiled in 1911, and was not only outdated, but also conceptually unsuitable for the task of providing continuous information on the population:

> Registration differs from census taking in the important respects --
> (a) That it is concerned with individuals instead of statistics, and
> (b) That it must provide information as to the position at any time, instead of at a single appointed date.[7]

The author of this memorandum was S.P. Vivien, Assistant Secretary to the English Commission of the National Health Insurance Commission, who was advising the Local Government Board on the compilation of the register. His experience from the Insurance scheme which was initiated in 1911 made him exceedingly skeptical as to the effectiveness of such an endeavour. For whilst a census placed the responsibility for supplying the relevant data upon the head of a household, each individual was responsible for himself with regard to a register. As such, he claimed, it would be virtually impossible to check up on each person, nor would threats or actual punishment by law be of any great use:

> The result will be that registration will be seriously incomplete, not owing to pat abstention, but from sheer inertia, indecision, and lack of guidance. ... Few people have any conception as to the extent to which movement from one address to another

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[6] ibid.

[7] S.P. Vivien, Confidential Memorandum on the National Registration Scheme, (PRO RG 28/1) p.1.

> takes place among the industrial population. One large Approved [insurance] Society has put it as high as one removal per member, per annum. The London Insurance Committee received, during 1913, 600,000 notices of removals affecting members of an insured population of 1,450,000 under a system which broke down because removals failed to be notified.[8]

Vivien attacked not only the concept of registration as inviable, but also the specific wording of the Act itself: "Every one of its features has a counterpart in some feature of the early system of registration experimented upon by the Insurance Commission, which was abandoned as unworkable as a result of dearly bought experience."[9]

Despite these warnings and reservations, however, National Registration day went ahead on August 15, 1915 in accordance with the guidelines laid down by the Act. In a circular to the local authorities from the Local Government Board[10] it was specified that each local authority was responsible for dividing itself into sub-areas, appointing enumerators and conducting the process of registration on time. "The Registration Forms when collected will [then] constitute the local register of each regional district."[11] In a subsequent memorandum to local registrars the Registrar-General[12] gave instructions, which were somewhat complex, as to the tabulation of the completed registration forms. These were to be coded primarily according to occupations, 46 in number. The forms for men were to be blue, but after their occupational coding the "returns for males of military age -- 18 to 41 -- should now be copied

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[8] ibid. pp. 3-4. The emphasis appears in the original document.

[9] ibid, p.6.

[10] Circular on National Registration Act, 1915, PRO RG 28/1.

[11] ibid. p.2.

[12] Memorandum of Registrar-General, 20.7.1915 (PRO RG 28/1).

on the pink forms supplied for the purpose."[13] After the process of tabulation, and the distribution of Registration certificates, the forms were to be kept in a permanent coding of occupations, alphabetically arranged.

Once the Register was compiled a policy committee was created, to advise on the best use to be made of it. Their most important suggestion was the creation of a permanent committee which would "correlate the manpower needs of industry and the military. This led, in October, to the creation of the Reserved Occupation Committee, which began to work in this direction,"[14] and was also responsible for tabulating the forms. But very soon the problems of keeping the Register updated, as envisaged by Mr. Vivien, emerged. On March 16, 1916, for example, The Times reported that "there have been nearly 100,000 removals since the Register was taken on August 15 last, and a large number of men of military age have not been traced." By September 1916 "the military authorities began taking strong action against the supposedly large numbers of unexempted men who were evading the net. Parties of soldiers swooped on the exits from railway stations, parks, football fields, cinemas, theatres, and prize fights. All males who looked of military age and were not in uniform were apprehended."[15] Few men were found in this manner, which greatly antagonized the public, and was ultimately abandoned.

In a second memorandum Mr. Vivien had suggested putting the onus of notification of removal upon employers, since the "industrial classes change their address many times

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[13] ibid, p.3.

[14] Adams, op. cit. p.102.

[15] Wilson, op. cit. p.400.

without changing their employment. ... [and those] who employ the bulk of the employed population are relatively few and responsible."[16] The major drawback of this plan lay in securing the returns from small employers, since this would be dependant "upon the zeal of the local registration authority."[17] Domestic employers were deemed unimportant. According to the final report written by the General Register Office after the war this suggestion was not implemented,[18] nor was any other effective updating scheme. As a result, the report criticises the wording of the Act, since

> the provisions for its maintenance did not secure the constant revision necessary to keep the Register strictly on its original lines. Thus, although every person between the ages of 15 and 65 years ... was included at first, by the lapse of time the register at the end of 1916 related to persons between the ages of 16 years 4.5 months and 66 years 4.5 months. Moreover, the Register excluded men who had been discharged from the naval or military forces and, owing to the absence of any legal obligation in the matter, had purposely refrained from registering.[19]

Use of the Register for Recruiting Purposes:

The National Register, for all its faults, became the administrative corner-stone of conscription. For despite it not being updated or even initially comprehensive, it was still the most recent survey in the Isles, and moreover one that contained data on the working skills and employment of the population. When the initial tabulation of the forms was completed

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[16] Mr Vivien's Second Memorandum, PRO RG 28/1, pp. 2-3.

[17] ibid. p.6.

[18] "...though at a later date (May 1916) an Order in Council amending the Defence of the Realm Regulations required all employers of males of military age to make and to exhibit on their premises lists of all such employers." (Memorandum on the National Register, 1915-1919, 31.5.1919, PRO RG 28/1; p.18.)

[19] ibid. p.25.

in October 1915, the Register for England and Wales had 21,627,596 names on it.[20] 5,158,211 (including the Scottish returns) were recorded on pink forms, thus men of a military age, of which 1,519,432 were starred.[21] "Further reducing the number available by the accepted average of 25 per cent for medical rejection, this left a [military] manpower pool of approximately 2,700,000."[22] It now remained for a bureaucratic system to be evolved, which would translate the figures into actual "call-up" notices addressed to specific citizens.

All recruiting efforts, as noted, and the administration of the registration process, were in the hands of the local authorities. This remained the case also after the introduction of compulsion, whereby copies of the Registration forms pertaining to men between the ages of 18 and 41 (and subsequently those under 18) were given to local military authorities by the local civilian ones. "From these forms cards were prepared, three for each man, for use by the Area Commanders (white), the Sub-Area Commanders (red), and by local Recruiting Committees (blue)."[23] Thus military registers were also created in each area, which were kept on a par with the local registers, since the local authorities notified the Area Commanders of all deaths and changes in address of men of military age. "By these means the military authorities were kept posted as to the men available for recruiting ... so far as the National Register was complete and accurate."[24]

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[20] Memorandum on the National register 1915-1919, op. cit. p.38. Since it was under a separate authority, no figures are given for Scotland.

[21] Adams & Poirier, Conscription Controversy, op. cit. p.98.

[22] ibid.

[23] Memorandum on the National register 1915-1919, op. cit. p.19.

[24] ibid. pp. 19-20.

Strictly in terms of recruitment, this was the system that was set up to secure it. The channels of information were kept open between the military and civilian local authorities, but the ultimate responsibility of conscripting an individual lay with the local recruiting committees. If a man was called up for enlistment the latter informed the civilian authorities of the fact; whereas in a case of death in action the latter were notified by the military authority. It was therefore possible to enforce the measure of conscription, yet the basic problems revealed in the final report reflect a far from water-tight system:

> Local Authorities sometimes returned ... [a notification of enlistment from the recruiting committee] and reported their inability to trace the original registration form; most of these cases were found on investigation to be men who had notified a change of address to the recruiting officer ... but had failed to notify the Registration Authority, who was therefore unable to obtain the original form from the district of the former address. ... [These forms] were also frequently returned because the Local Authority was aware that the man was still in civil employment ... or because a notification of change of address had been received subsequently to the notification of enlistment and the man was therefore apparently not in the army.[25]

With the establishment of the Ministry of National Service in November 1917, the military and local registers were revised, as were the methods of communication between the two authorities. Since the Register had not proven itself for industrial needs, all local registers were rearranged strictly on an alphabetical basis, regardless of occupation; and serial numbers, identical for both authorities, were given to the men's forms. Moreover, it was decided that upon enlistment men should surrender their Registration Certificates, which the military authorities returned to the appropriate local one, in lieu of the previous method of sending notification forms. These measures all made revisions and corrections of the two registers, military and civilian, easier. However, the actual system of calling up men through the local

[25] ibid. p.22.

recruiting committees remained essentially the same. As such, it "proved itself to be invaluable for the existing recruiting system."[26]

In summary, it appears that even before its compilation the effectiveness of the Register, as a continuous source of viable information on the state of employment and manpower availability in the country, was deemed limited. Indeed, once compiled and put to use its, limitations were glaringly apparent, as a member of the National Register Committee, originally responsible for its creation, admitted in a personal letter:

> I shall strictly charge my Secretaries that all reference to my connection with the National Register Committees is to be kept out of my tomb stone. I am most heavily ashamed of the whole business, which for futility and ineptitude has been hard to beat -- even in this war.[27]

Over the three years in which it was used this description was proved correct, and therefore it must be noted that conscription, when enforced, did not apply to the entire male population defined by the Military Service Acts. Rather, it affected those men who appeared on the Register, and who could also be traced, at any given time. Undoubtedly this was a majority of the men sought, who were conscripted under an evolving method which relied heavily upon their co-operation. In other words, if an individual wished to not make himself known to the local authorities, or evade them by moving address without notifying them, he could thus escape the military ones -- who were totally dependant on the civilian authorities for this data.

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[26] ibid. p.27.

[27] Letter of Mrs. Violet Carruthers to S.P. Vivien, 14.3.1916; (PRO RG 28/1).

PART II: EXPERIENCE INTO IDENTITY

A. Civilian into Soldier

"... beyond the release from boredom
there is the joy in uniforms which stimulates
war. The instinct for fancy dress is hard to kill..."

(Hans Zinsser, Rats, Lice and History)

Chapter Four: Enlistment

This chapter will deal with the initial rite of passage the conscript experienced, from the status of civilian to that of soldier. The conscript experience was basically differentiated from that of the volunteer by the process of enlistment. The latter executed an individual act of free will: both his decision to join and his physical presence at a recruiting office were an expression of self motivation. For whatever reason,[1] the volunteer wanted to join the army and hence took himself off to a location in which his desire could be fulfilled. A succinct summary of such a self motivated process was given by one who volunteered in September 1914: Upon seeing ambulances full of wounded men, "I determined to join up that same evening. I went home, had a hasty meal, smartened up and duly presented myself at the HQ of the 24th London regiment."[2] In direct contrast, the inner deliberations or self motivation of the individual conscript were irrelevant. It was a state dictate, that annuled both individualism and motivation, and a formal, printed summons, sent through the mail, which brought the conscript to the recruiting office on a given date, regardless of his own thoughts or inclinations.

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[1] The thought process was not identical in each case since an individual could reach a decision to volunteer due to a variety of causes. For a summary of reasons for volunteering see: Peter Simkins, op. cit. pp. 168-175; Denis Winter, Death's Men, op. cit. ch.1.

[2] E.J.O. Bird, undated letter, IWM BBC/Great War Series.

Conscription means the "compulsory enlistment of men for military (or naval) service"[3]. The legislative transcription of this definition, as embedded in all the Military Service Acts of the Great War, was that the applicable group of "male British subjects" were "deemed as from the appointed date to have been enlisted in His Majesty's regular forces for general service with the Colours or in the Reserve for the Period of the war, and have been forthwith transferred to the Reserve."[4] Hence both the decision to enlist and the act of attestation were revoked from the sphere of the individual, placing the entire process of enlistment on an equal, impersonal and bureaucratic basis.

This supremacy of a state system over individual free-will was well summarized in the following account: "I was a Post Office Sorter from 1906 and was called up under the Military Service Acts June 1916 after having previously volunteered for the Army Post Office and withdrawing my application in 1915."[5] The writer had clearly debated the issue of enlistment, and decided against it. The introduction of conscription, however, made his personal decision irrelevant: Being "called up" was the formal notification that he was "deemed" to have attested his willingness to serve in the army, and as such he was already a member of the Reserve force.

The elimination of free will was coupled to another factor apparent in the process of enlistment under conscription: the individual's passivity. This may be seen, for example, in

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[3] The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.

[4] Military Service Act (No. 2), 1916, in Public General Acts, 5 & 6 George V, Chapter 104. The first section of the Act, regarding attestation, was identical in all the Military Service acts in the war.

[5] Cobb W, unpublished account, IWM 73/188/1, p.1.

a diary entry for February 14, 1917: "Received calling up notice from Croydon Recruiting Office."[6] The diarist was a civil servant, probably in his late twenties when he was summoned. As such he was comparable to those volunteers who disrupted their personal and professional life in order to enlist. In his case, however, his life was disrupted for him by the external force of an army summons whilst he himself was passive.

The 18 year old recruits, who usually joined up when they were eighteen and a half, comprised another large section of the conscript population, whose enlistment was best typified by the following summary: "In the December of the year 1916 I reached the age of 18. In the following March I was duly enlisted."[7] In this case the conscript's professional life was not disrupted, since he had not yet created one. This was also true of the man who recalled that "During the period 1914-1918 I was a quiet youth of a working class family until the 5th May 1916, when at the age of 18 ... I joined the 2/4th Battalion East Lancs Regiment."[8] Yet in both cases the passivity was marked: the authors' age initiated a bureaucratic process, yet as the focus of this process they were required only to comply with the orders sent to them. Hence they were actually a statistical focus and not a personal one, in that their age, sex and nationality fulfilled the prerequisites laid down by the state for the enactment of the bureaucratic process of conscription.

One option open to young men who wished not to be identified as conscripts, was volunteering for a unit prior to their eighteenth birthday, and then awaiting this date for

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[6] Tonkyn W D, Diary, IWM Con Shelf.

[7] Barraclough E C, unpublished account, IWM 86/86/1, p.1.

[8] John William Binns, undated letter, IWM BBC/Great War Series.

actually joining up. Thus one young man, who wanted "the pride of being a volunteer" found out that "certain regiments were permitted to accept men who offered themselves at eighteen if they were physically fit ... Consequently, two days before my eighteenth birthday ... I was enrolled as a member of the London Rifle Brigade."[9] Another youth used this method as a means of controlling his placement in the army, and therefore volunteered for the Royal Flying Corps:

> It was 1917, and as I had no desire to be conscripted into the infantry when I was eighteen, having a strong desire to be an airman... Just after my eighteenth birthday and while waiting for my call-up, I went over to Leeds to stay with my parents until that fateful day in early September [1917].[10]

The men who enlisted under the Derby Scheme may be viewed in this context as a combination of volunteerism and conscription: when canvassed in their own homes or offices the Derbyites attested their willingness to join up. They thus attested themselves, and were not deemed to have done so by the state; yet their free will was expressed as an answer to a question, and not as a self motivated act. In other words, as a contemporary satirist put it, the issue was "whether the necessary men are to be compelled to volunteer or persuaded to be compulsorily enrolled."[11] However, once attested, they were treated exactly as conscripts in that they became the passive foci of the bureaucratic process.

This mixture of voluntarism and compulsion was well exemplified in the case of a man who attested under the Scheme in November 1915. Being single, he was placed in Group 5, which

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[9] Angel R L, unpublished account, IWM; p.1.

[10] F.A.J. Taylor, The Bottom of the Barrel, op. cit. p.16.

[11] Punch, October 1915.

was called up within two weeks of the first Military Service Act being passed. His employer appealed at the local Tribunal established under the Scheme, and he was moved to Group 10. But "this availed me very little as the next ten Groups were called up together."[12] A further appeal postponed his eventual enlistment to April 1916. It is thus clear that once an individual came in contact with the bureaucracy that eventually controlled conscription, his identity as either Derbyite or conscript was irrelevant. Yet there were advantages to the Derby Scheme. Lt. Edward Allfree, a solicitor with four children, happily attested his willingness to enlist under the Scheme, precisely because it combined the act of free attestation with an externally imposed schedule. Allfree had not volunteered because he felt that his familial duty superceded his patriotic one, yet he felt some guilt over the matter. The Scheme thus allowed him to pay lip-service to his sense of duty to King and Country in that he attested his willingness to join. Yet it also forcibly removed him from his family, without him actually having to initiate this action: "...the burden of deciding when one ought to enlist was removed from the individual."[13] Thus in contrast to the conscripts, who were passive throughout the entire process of enlistment, Allfree and all Derbyites became so only after their attestation:

> There was now nothing to do or to worry about but wait until one should be called up. In due course I received notice that my group was called up, and that I was to join at Canterbury Barracks on 10th June, 1916.[14]

The second stage of enlistment under conscription commenced when the individual attended the local recruiting office. In effect this part of the proceedings reflected equally upon

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[12] Bradbury S, unpublished account, IWM 81/35/1; preface.

[13] Allfree Lt E C, unpublished account, IWM 77/14/1, p.10.

[14] ibid. p.11.

volunteers and conscripts, since both emerged from the recruiting office either as classified soldiers or as men officially and certifiably exempted due to incompatibility with the military requirements. Both groups were therefore filtered through an identical system, since it was a basic rite of passage into the collective fraternity of the British army.[15] Yet in terms of status they were totally distinct: the volunteers arrived at the recruiting office as free men, and as such could actually depart the premises at any time, up to the point at which they were sworn in as soldiers. It was thus up to the volunteers themselves to initiate the short bureaucratic process of enlistment -- which was usually confined only to the recruiting office -- as it was also in their power to terminate it. W. Cobb, the post office sorter discussed above, exercised this privilege when he withdrew his voluntary application form in 1915. In another case a group of men wishing to volunteer in August 1914 waited for three days in the crowds before Great Scotland Yard, the Central London Recruiting Depot, before deciding to leave and go in search of a less crowded recruiting depot.[16]

In contrast, the conscripts did not decide when to present themselves at the recruiting office nor when to leave it. Upon arriving at the office they were already attested soldiers whose time and movements were no longer under their own control. They were subject to the demands of the military authorities. The immediate implication of this situation was that from the moment they entered the recruiting office they could be treated as new recruits, the lowest form of life in the army. An eighteen year old who enlisted in Worcester in December 1916 noted that "the first bloke as I met on the parade ground was the old Sergeant-Major -- the

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[15] Entry into military service is "always distinguished by its own rite of passage ... [in order to] create a framework of ritual and relationships which will enable the soldier to withstand the impact of battle." Richard Holmes, Firing Line, (Penguin, 1987), p.32.

[16] Leonard Preuss, letter, 22.7.1963, IWM BBC/Great War Series.

recruiting officer. "What the hell do you want?" he said. "Oh, I've come to join the Army, sir," I said."[17] Another conscript recalls having "my new khaki uniform more or less thrown at me and ... told to report again in the morning."[18]

The conscripts' presence at the recruiting office, as a response to the summons they received, was further proof that they were already in the midst of a bureaucratic process, extended much beyond anything experienced by the volunteers. Alfred M. Hale, a minor composer who was conscripted in 1917 after previously being exempted by the Navy, noted that "my 'calling-up notice' required my attendance at the Ealing recruiting office at 9 am sharp on the morning of 1 May."[19] Hale did indeed present himself at the prescribed time and date, only to be interviewed by a recruiting officer who suggested he procure a rejection certificate from the Naval authorities. He thus went across London to the appropriate office but failed to get the certificate. Thereupon his solicitor despatched a clerk to "worry the Naval authorities" who sent him "from pillar to post before he got an answer,"[20] which was still negative. This was the start of Hale's "ordeal", in which the dealings with bureaucrats played an immense part, as did the external constraints put upon his freedom. His eventual enlistment on May 4 led him to compare his experiences with "a certain compartment full of convicts bound for Dartmoor I had once seen at North Road Station, Plymouth."[21]

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[17] Rudge B, Oral History Project interview, IWM 85/39/1, p.3.

[18] Barraclough, op. cit. p.1.

[19] Paul Fussell, (ed.), The Ordeal of Alfred M. Hale, op. cit. p.36.

[20] ibid p.37.

[21] ibid. p.40.

Alfred Hale was a patently unmilitary individual, and thus his descriptions might be slightly exaggerated; yet all the descriptions of conscript enlistment examined here portray the movements of the individual as a process of response to orders laid down by a bureaucratic system. A typical chronology of a conscript's attestation and induction revolved around a series of papers procured from military clerks and doctors. For example:[22]

14.2.17	Received calling up notice from Croydon Recruiting Office.
15.2.17	Asked for permit from Croydon Recruiting Office to allow me to be medically examined in London.
16.2.17	Obtained paper from Civil Service Rifles saying they are willing to accept me.
17.2.17	Heard officially that I was to be released if fit physically for general service.
21.2.17	Received permit and was examined and passed. Resigned from Specials.
28.2.17	Joined up.

Each of these entries refers to some form of contact with bureaucracy. Moreover, this is the complete record as it was originally written, and not an abbreviated version. Therefore it was the diarist who saw his enlistment as a bureaucratic process, initiated by the summons sent to him. Whilst he undoubtedly made an attempt to exercise some control over his fate by requesting a specific unit, the Civil Service Rifles, this was still done within the confines of a set procedure, governed by permits and forms.

The military bureaucracy developed and changed in accordance with the needs of the army and the war. Yet the actual process of enlistment through which both volunteer and conscript were filtered at the recruiting office remained identical, comprising three stages: completing

[22] Tonkyn, op.cit.

an attestation form, undergoing a medical examination and classification, and taking the oath of allegiance and the King's shilling, which was a day's basic pay for a private soldier. For the volunteer this procedure was absolute in confirming his new soldierly status, rarely entailing any further administrative encounters. However, as noted above, this was a contract of which he had to approve before committing himself, taking the oath only if he "accepted the conditions of service."[23]

The conscript's consent to serve in the army was not sought, and he was obliged to take the oath and the shilling if he was found fit for military service. Hence the proceedings at the recruiting office, apart from the medical examination which will be discussed below, were merely a formality as far as the conscripts were concerned. This may explain the lack of documentation of this part of their military experiences, as reflected in the writings examined here. In many cases there was no reference at all to the process of enlistment, beyond certain administrative aspects such as those discussed above.[24] Since the actual process of enlistment experienced at the recruiting station was identical for both volunteers and conscripts, the discussion below will draw upon sources relevant to both, with emphasis upon those aspects which were relevant only to the conscripts.

The attestation form was composed of questions concerning the personal particulars of the individual conscript, and as such it became the basis for his military service file.[25] However,

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[23] Simkins, Kitchener's Army, op. cit. p.176.

[24] For an analysis of this trend of abstention from discussing the experiences of conscription see below Part III.

[25] A file which was created upon enlistment and henceforth documented the army career of each soldier: regular, volunteer or conscript. Any information or form pertaining to the

it must be noted that "certain branches of the army used different varieties of forms on similar occasions such as attestation. These documents differed in form and contents."[26] All attestation forms recorded age, place of birth and/or address (parish/town/county), nationality, occupation, marital status, next of kin, religion, residential status and prison record.[27] In the case of conscripts many of these details were already known and recorded due to the National Register of August 1915. The first summons received by the conscripts' were based upon the returns of the Register, therefore the completion of the attestation form served more as a confirmation of their particulars.[28]

Within the personal service file of a soldier it was the attestation form which was most regularly updated to "provide information on "transfers promotions reductions casualties etc.", wounds, participation in campaigns, subsequent decorations, and a summation of periods served "abroad". The regular updating also regarded changes in marital status, in family composition (births & deaths) and in the next of kin's address. Finally, it provides the dates and administrative reasons for discharge."[29]

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soldier was added to it throughout his service. Any change in a soldier's personal or military status was corrected upon his original attestation form. The remaining bulk of service files from the First World War are lodged in the Hayes Archive, and are largely inaccessible for research purposes.

[26] Doron Lamm, "British Soldiers of the First World War", in Historical Social Research, vol. 14, No.4, 1988, p.63.

[27] See Appendix I: Copy of an attestation form.

[28] See Appendix II: Sample of National Registration Certificate from August 27, 1915, with the date of attestation in 1916 added to it.

[29] Lamm, op. cit. p.63.

The medical examination was the most crucial element within the enlistment process. Upon it rested the decision as to whether an individual citizen would become a soldier, and if so what would be his classification for service. As they had already been attested, many conscripts viewed the entire process of enlistment as no more than the medical examination and its results: "Examined and passed. Class A."[30] or "Had a medical was passed A1."[31] Given this emphasis, it is ironic that the medical examinations were notoriously superficial throughout the war. In the period of voluntarism the medical examiners were civilian doctors who were paid one shilling for every man they passed, and nothing for men they rejected. It is therefore hardly surprising the examinations were rapid and cursory, especially in light of the urgent and permanent need for more recruits. During the conscript era the examiners were initially conscripts themselves and subsequently civilian G.P.'s who were paid a flat rate of £2.- per session, for the examination of thirty to forty men; but only 2/6 per man for the examination of less per session.[32] Yet the pressures of time, the heavy influx of men and the need for soldiers still rendered many of the examinations inadequate.[33] Thus the following testimony was entirely typical of the medical examinations and examiners, and the public perception of both: "I went down [to the recruiting office] on Friday and passed the doctor who hardly looked at me."[34] Much also depended on the personality and attitude of the

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[30] Fisher W L, diary entry 20.2.1917, IWM 85/32/1.

[31] Cobb, op.cit. p.1.

[32] The Lancet, 26.2.1916, p.490.

[33] The British Medical Association did not appear to intervene in this use of the medical profession. Neither the British Medical Journal nor the Lancet made comment on the doctors' role in these medical examinations. Their concern appears to have centred far more on the enlistment and/or conscription of medical students, and the feared subsequent loss of potential doctors.

[34] Humphrey Gleave to Edward Gleave, letter of 21.2.1916, IWM 78/31/1 T.

examiner: "There was another doctor in the room whom I saw ... [socially] today who says he would have rejected me at once: most unfortunate."[35]

Before January 1916 the medical examiner classified a man either as "fit" or "unfit" for military service. In this way D.H. Lawrence, who had been called up early in 1916, was immediately exempted from service due to tuberculosis. In his novel Kangaroo, he summed up the process simply:

> He was summoned to join the army: and went. ... Was medically examined in the morning by two doctors, both gentlemen, who knew the sacredness of another naked man: and was rejected.[36]

But conscription and the ensuing reorganization of manpower both within and without the army brought in its wake a more detailed scale of fitness for service. The Department of Recruiting in the War Office issued instructions "establishing an A,B,C system to classify men ... "A" men fit for general service. "B" men fit for service abroad in a support capacity and "C" men fit for service at home only."[37] Each category was then graded in a scale of 1 to 3, the latter representing the weakest element.[38] Alfred Hale, for example, who had a nervous disposition and became flustered by the directives shouted at him in the eye-test, was initially classified as C2 and thus unfit for active service overseas. As the war progressed and the military classification standards deteriorated, he was upgraded and eventually sent to France.

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[35] ibid.

[36] D.H. Lawrence, Kangaroo, (Penguin, 1950), pp. 237-8.

[37] J.M. Winter, "Military Fitness and Civilian Health in Britain in the First World War," in Journal of Contemporary History, vol. 15, 1980, pp. 215-6.

[38] See Appendix III: Classification Certificate.

Upgrading was quite common, often reflecting the constant need for combat men at the front. Yet in some cases it was undertaken against army orders[39], and with little regard to the suitability and fitness of the soldier for active service.[40] Sometimes it was the army authorities that instigated a mass upgrading due to sudden heavy losses at the front, or some other unforseen circumstance. Thus A.J. Abraham enlisted late in 1917, yet in March 1918, he suddenly found himself in France:

> My Battalion was composed entirely of eighteen year olds, known as A4 boys ... [who were by law[41]] regarded as being suitable only for home defence until we reached the age of 19. A few days after the German breakthrough became obvious we were reclassified overnight as A1 and a draft list of about two hundred names went up on the Battalion Orders Board.[42]

F.A.J. Taylor also claimed that this attack resulted in men being "upgraded from C3 to A1, recently wounded men had their convalescent period cut short, leave was cancelled and from all parts of Britain men were hurriedly collected together and shipped across the Channel to fill the gaps."[43]

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[39] In the summer of 1918 Brigadier-General Crozier specifically disregarded an order that B grade man should not be employed in "offensive action", since he considered it absurd. F.P. Crozier, Brasshat in No Man's Land, (Cape, 1930), p.216. In doing this Crozier effectively upgraded all B men he placed in action to A1.

[40] An officer of the Royal Welch Fusiliers who served on the Western front throughout the war claimed that "it was characteristic of men transferred from category units and subsidiary services to resent re-posting to front-line service, and to scheme to get away from it." Quoted in J.C. Dunn, The War the Infantry Knew 1914-1919, (Cardinal Sphere, 1989), p.246.

[41] "... steps shall be taken to prevent so far as possible the sending of men to serve abroad before they attain the age of nineteen." Military Service Act, 1916 (Session 2), May 1916, Public General Acts, 6 & 7, George V, Chapter 15.

[42] A.J. Abraham, unpublished account, IWM P.191, p.8a.

[43] The Bottom of the Barrel, op. cit. p.43.

The introduction of conscription did not solve the problem of military manpower, and the standards of medical examinations fell even lower in an attempt to get more recruits into the combat zone. The basic problem was that these questionable selection procedures produced an extremely inadequate class of soldier, a result which was ultimately useless to the army. The Royal Welch Fusiliers suffered heavy casualties in the first days of the battle of the Somme, and sent urgent requests for replacements. The condition of the recruits who arrived late in July 1916 reflects the cursory medical inspection they had undergone:

> Whether Volunteers, Derbyites or Conscripts, the average physique was good enough, but the total included an astonishing number of men whose narrow or misshapen chests, and other deformities or defects, unfitted them to stay the more exacting requirements of service in the field. Permission to send back a very few was accompanied by a peremptory intimation that a complaint of any future draft passed by the Base would not be listened to. Route marching, not routine tours of trench duty, made recurring casualties of these men.[44]

Prior to conscription men who were clearly unfit simply did not attest and were thus not medically examined and exempted. Conscription made this process necessary, thereby putting even greater pressure upon the medical boards who were obliged to examine all men summoned through the bureaucratic machinery, even those who presented disablitiy certificates from civilian doctors. This procedure, and the overall importance of the medical examination, is well illustrated in the correspondence between Captain Edward Gleave, an officer in the regular army serving on the Western Front, and his brother Humphrey, a medical student who suffered from colitis. In February 1916 the latter, who lived in Leeds, suddenly found himself enmeshed in the bureaucracy of conscription due to the January Military Service Act:

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[44] Dunn, op.cit. p.245.

> I went down to the recruiting office again today. I saw the doctor ... He said he could not reject me on [Dr] Roberts' certificate because he did not reject anyone. I must attest and then if I had colitis I must apply to a board of 5 Leeds doctors, and they would probably exempt me ... If not the recruiting man declared they would give me light duties and peptonised milk and anything in fact: In which case I should be very glad to go but I am afraid we know the contrary. They are accepting almost anybody now: cripples, men with hernia etc etc.[45]

By mid 1917 the truth of Gleave's last remark soon became apparent in all quarters. The pressing need for recruits had reduced selectivity to the exceedingly low point at which disabled and unfit men were enlisted and often also unrealistically graded. This was reflected in an autobiographical novel written by a teacher from Glasgow, whence the hero, Stephen Lethbridge, was summoned to a medical board in mid 1917. He had been exempted on medical grounds in the previous year, yet due to the 1917 Military Service Act he was called up for re-examination. He was interviewed by a civilian doctor who "asked the stereotyped questions. 'Have you ever had fits? Have you ever been in a sanitorium? Have you ever been in an asylum?'"[46] Based upon this interview, a brief medical examination and a certificate from Lethbridge's own physician, he was classified C3. Since teachers were only taken if they were B1 or above, Lethbridge was sent to the president of the medical board, a young military doctor. He glanced at the civilian certificate and asked if Lethbridge was in constant pain. Since he admitted to being in constant discomfort and only some pain the RAMC man recategorized him as B1.

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[45] Humphrey Gleave to Edward Gleave, op. cit. letter of 12.2.1916.

[46] W.B. Henderson, unpublished novel, IWM 81/19/1, pp. 6-7.

By the end of 1916 only 6.5% of new recruits were rejected, whilst approximately 50% of those taken were placed in grade A.[47] Both the army and the public felt outraged by these figures, which appeared to benefit neither the individuals examined nor the army. The standards of classification were therefore revised yet again in the autumn of 1917, after being reviewed by a select committee, which "observed with disquiet the lack of public confidence in the medical boards."[48] As a result it was decided fundamentally to restructure the procedure for the medical inspection of recruits, with the afore-mentioned reintroduction of civilian G.P.'s working under civilian supervision. In turn the classification system was also changed from the A,B,C grades and inner categories to four single grades: Grade I incorporated all the previous A men; grade II had the B1 and C1 men, with all the remaining B and C men grouped together in grade III. Grade IV was for the rejected men who suffered from severe disabilities such as valvular diseases of the heart and epilepsy.[49] Thus a recruit from late 1917 who had suffered from measles was passed on for a second medical examination in a hospital. His description of it reflects a far greater degree of thoroughness:

> I had a sort of double quarto white sheet filled up with my name, address, illnesses ... and habits (including horse-riding and jumping, good cyclist and O.T.C. work). Also were (sic) very keen about drinking (wine or spirit etc.) and smoking... [I saw a] "Johnny" who examined me... I then went with some dozen other men ... and was x-rayed and had an electrocardiogram taken ... I was then tested for blood pressure etc. -- had to whizz up and down stairs and then had my pulse felt.[50]

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[47] J.M. Winter, The Great War and the British People, (Macmillan, 1986), p.52.

[48] K. Grieves, The Politics... op. cit. pp. 131-2. This was the Shortt Committee, chaired by Edward Shortt, which convened initially in July 1917 to discuss the methods of examination and the rates of exemption apparent in the year's recruiting statistics. For a full discussion of the committee see: ibid, pp. 130-33; for its decisions on medical classification see: J.M. Winter, The Great War, op.cit. pp. 50-55.

[49] Winter, The Great War..., pp. 55-6.

[50] J.F. Thompson, undated letter, IWM 72/119/1.

These new measures did much to ensure that obviously unfit men were not placed in Grade I and sent out to fight. Yet it must be noted that military considerations nearly always overrode medical ones, and thus fitness was really a relative term.

Once the attestation form had been completed, and the conscript had been medically examined and classified he took the oath[51] and accepted the King's shilling. Within the lengthy bureaucratic process of enlistment experienced by the conscripts the oath was an important mental focus. "All armies impose some sort of oath on their recruits... [since it imbues] considerable moral authority." From that moment he was officially a soldier on active service, as opposed to being in the Reserve Corps. Before departing from the recruiting office, however, the conscript still had to be placed in a military unit, the last stage of the bureaucratic process of enlistment. This procedure should have been based upon the conscript's medical classification and, as far as possible, his own preferences. The latter, however, was usually disregarded in favour of army requirements i.e. the need to despatch most available men to the front, either in a fighting capacity or as auxiliaries. Due to the evolving nature of the war and the rapid expansion of the British army over such a relatively short period of time, this was the case throughout the war. Even in the volunteer period a recruit's personal wishes were usually considered only if a lull in the fighting had reduced somewhat the urgent need for replacements at the front.

In light of the limited choices open to the volunteers, it is clear that the conscripts' options would be narrower still. Indeed, part of the propaganda of the 1915 Derby Scheme was that if men attested freely they would be given a greater opportunity to express their own

[51] Holmes, op. cit. p.32.

preferences regarding placement. Yet even this option was severely qualified: "Although every endeavour will be made to allot them when called out to whatever unit in the service they may wish to join, no pledge will be given that their request will be gratified; and they will have to be alloted to whatever is in most need of their services."[52] Overall, it seems that this was actually the policy applied to recruits throughout the war, including the conscripts.

As noted, the medical classification of a recruit decided his placement, in the broad terms of suitability for a combat unit. Thus given that his grading was A or I, and he was willing to narrow his selection to fighting regiments, a recruit did have a few options: "[I] was given the choice of three infantry regiments. I chose the Rifle Brigade having a chum in that unit."[53] The need for a familiar face as an influential factor in choosing a unit is similar to the logic behind the Pals Battalions,[54] which offered the recruit slightly more options on service with friends. This was true also of local regiments, where similarity in background replaced personal friendship as an incentive for choosing them. Professional affiliation was another important factor, as in the case of the civil servant who requested permission to join the Civil Service Rifles.[55] This element, however, was viable for fit men only within the confines of combat units. An eighteen year old apprentice grocer conscripted in 1916 and

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[52] Lord Derby's speech at the Mansion House, 19.10.1915, in which he presented his scheme. The Times, 20.10.1915, p.10.

[53] Cobb, op. cit. p.1.

[54] Pals Battalions were started throughout the country at the beginning of the war, the idea being that men who enlisted together would serve together. This was an attempt to counter the anonymous, and thus off-putting, military framework in favour of a familiar human landscape.

[55] Tonkyn, op. cit. diary entry for 15.2.1917.

classified A1, asked to be placed in the Royal Army Service Corps, since he felt his experience would be useful there. But the army based their decision on other considerations:

> He [the recruiting clerk] frowned and said 'full up', he then went on to say that drivers were wanted in the Royal Field Artillery, and as I looked a nice light weight, and came from a town full of horses it would be just the job for me. Without more to-do he produced a form, [and] took my name and other particulars.[56]

In some cases a conscript was placed only some days after he had completed the enlistment process at the local recruiting station, especially if he had requested a specific unit for which he was fit and needed. Often this required a bureaucratic process beyond the capabilities of the local recruiting station, in which case the conscript had to pursue his case for some days:

> 20.2.17 Examined and passed. Class A.
>
> 26.2.17 Reported at Birkenhead ... Sent to Chester and passed for Civil Service Rifles. O.K. Went home for the evening.
>
> 27.2.17 [Went to London early in the morning, to Somerset House.] Papers not arrived from Chester, so nothing done.
>
> 28.2.17 Papers arrived am fitted out.[57]

The process of enlistment was at an end once the conscript was placed in an army unit. The commencement of his military training marked his assimilation into the army as a Private, much the same as a Regular or Volunteer soldier before him. It was thus the initial bureaucratic contact with the army which was unique to the conscript, both in concept and in extent.

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[56] Creek Lt. P, unpublished account, IWM 87/31/1, p.20.

[57] W L Fisher, op. cit.

Conceptually, the conscript experience was marked by the lack of choice or control of the individual over his own fate. The transition from the status of civilian to that of soldier was made prior to his knowledge and without his consent. This conceptual shift subsequently necessitated an extension of the bureaucratic process. Before conscription the limited system used in times of peace had merely been erratically expanded to accommodate the volunteers i.e. those men who specifically requested processing within it. Conscription meant that the bureaucratic machine had to be set in action much before an individual actually enlisted. First, a man eligible for conscription had to be singled out from the civilian population. Second, he had to be transferred on paper to the army Reserve Corps, thus marking the transition from civilian to soldier. Third, the newly conscripted man had to be informed of his new status, in the form of a summons to the local recruiting office. Without giving his consent, the conscript had thus been a focus of an entire bureaucratic process, specifically designed to induct him into the army.

The conscript's experience at the local recruiting office was basically a series of responses to the bureaucratic process, the conceptual element being irrelevant by this stage. Conscription was meant to be the great social equalizer, in that all men were selected according to criteria of age, sex and nationality, regardless of income or class. But conversely this lack of selectivity only served as a premise for yet further expansion of the bureaucratic machinery, since all men, be they fit and suitable for military service or not, had to be processed through it. The detailed schedules of exemption attached to each Military Service Act, for men either medically unfit or required in a reserved occupation, could release an individual from military service only after he had undergone the process of attestation and enlistment. Yet ironically, this massive attempt at bureaucratic organization for the benefit of the army and the nation

was mocked by the very organism both were serving -- the war. By its very erratic and changing nature it often made nonsense of any attempts at method, thus basically eliminating any element of choice within the system that created it. For example, in the first day of the Somme campaign some 60,000 British soldiers were killed and wounded. This wrought an overwhelming need for replacements in the field, regardless of the training, capability and suitability of those men available.

Two conclusions may therefore be drawn from the conscripts' enlistment experiences. The first is that their lack of choice was really limited to their initial transition from civilians to soldiers. Once within the army system they had very few options simply because the system itself often had none. Attempts at planning could be easily countermanded by the events of the war -- mostly huge battles, even those initiated by the Allies, that cost much and gained close to nothing.[58] These erratic impositions had affected the volunteer only once he had taken the oath and signed away his civilian identity. The conscript's experience was different because the dictates affected him long before he donned uniform. Thus one may also conclude that the conscript's lot was worse than any of his predecessors simply because he started his army career as a name on a piece of paper, and was thus treated throughout.

[58] The British army in the Great War has been compared to "the saurians of a bygone age, huge in strength, massive in body, but controlled by a nervous system so sluggish and extended that the organism could suffer fearful damage before the tiny distant brain could think of, let alone initiate, an adequate response." Norman F. Dixon, On the Psychology of Military Incompetence, (Futura, 1988), p.81.

There's an isolated, devastated spot I like to mention
Where all you hear is 'stand at ease'
'quick march' 'slope arms' 'attention'
It's miles away from anywhere, by god it is a rumen
A chap lived there for fifty years and never saw a woman.[1]

Chapter Five: Basic Training

The process of induction into the army and the commencement of a military career overlapped in the first week of basic training. It was here that the civilian started to acquire a military image, if not stance. The bureaucracy of enlistment wrought a technical transition in the status of the individual, from civilian to recruit. Basic training was designed to complete this process by advancing the recruit to the status of soldier. This chapter will therefore chart the kitting-out, existential conditions and military training experienced by conscripts in their training in England.

It is very difficult to establish a coherent pattern of the induction and training experiences of all the conscripts discussed here. In August 1916 it was decided to dispense with separate training schemes for each part of the BEF, thus the regular army, the Territorials and the New Armies, from which soldiers were despatched to them in a "strand feed" system. Instead, one overall training scheme was created, organized in sequentially numbered units which fed the entire army. In this framework, the general trend of transformation from civilian to soldier, within the initial confines of base depots and thence training camps, was the same for all.

[1] A ditty sung by the room orderly in Bulford Camp, quoted in Creek, op. cit. p.22. (A "rumen" is the "first stomach of a ruminant animal," The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.)

Within this process there were also set procedures experienced by each conscript, such as allocation of equipment, inoculation and military training of various types. However, the time and location in which these took place, as indeed the length of the entire process of training, was extremely erratic. Whilst one conscript spent three days at a base depot followed by three months in a training camp before being sent out to France[2], another passed through a depot in two days and then spent five months training.[3] However, as in the process of enlistment described above, this lack of uniformity reflected more upon the army as an organization in constant mobility and subject to sudden dictates, rather than upon the conscripts themselves. A further difficulty in the task of defining the training experiences of the conscripts results from the relative lack of documentation they themselves provided.[4] Some men totally ignored it, whilst others summed it up succinctly and blandly:

> I will pass over the months of training. What with physical "jerks", route marches, bayonet practice, firing, bombing and drilling I became much harder, both in body and soul and further I learned to swear with the worst of them.[5]

Given these limitations, this chapter will attempt to single out the experiences common to all the conscripts discussed here within the army system they encountered, and explain its impact upon them.

The process of enlistment was completed once the conscript was placed in a military unit. In some cases he would immediately be marched away to the railway station and taken to a

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[2] H.L. Adams, unpublished account, IWM 83/50/1.

[3] B W Hughes, diary, IWM 85/43/1.

[4] As in the case of enlistment, this phenomenon may be attributed to the conscripts' general attitude to the army and the war, and their part in it. This issue will be discussed fully in Part III of this dissertation.

[5] Barraclough, op. cit. p.1.

depot camp, where he would be kitted out for the start of his basic training. In other cases, conscripts were sent home after enlistment and told to report the next day, or days, for the commencement of training. Some recruiting offices were part of a military camp, in which case conscripts were given uniforms on the premises, and then sent home. Whatever the lapse of time, however, the army world became absolute to the conscript once he approached the train which would transport him to a training camp:

> The sergeant said "cheerio and the best of luck," we bundled onto the train and soon were off. I sat back and wondered what the future held, little did I realise then, that it held days which seemed like years and years that seemed like days and a nightmare.[6]

For most conscripts the first days of training served as a period of double initiation: Into the army as an organization, and into the company of the fellow recruits with whom they would spend the following months, sometimes even years. Undoubtedly the two were inter-connected, in that part of the "culture shock" of joining the army was the novel human landscape. An easy process of socialization could alleviate the disorientating and uncomfortable aspects of the unknown military experience. Thus a clerk who trained with the Civil Service Rifles: "Am thankful am with a decent lot or it would be unbearable. As it is, don't find it too bad."[7] Unfortunately the inverse procedure could also be true. One exceedingly religious conscript noted in revulsion:

> Many of my associates were unable to march to the station being under the influence of England's greatest curse: Strong drink, and so had to be taken to the station in conveyances.[8]

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[6] Creek, op. cit. p.21.

[7] W.L. Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 2.3.1917.

[8] Adams, op. cit. p.1. He further notes that when this group eventually arrived at Stoughton Barracks "we were described as the mysterious eighteen, as this number of the company

An eighteen year old recruit from a genteel home in Harrow-on-the-Hill wrote his mother:

> I came up in company with 20 other weird blighters whose native haunts seem to be Stratford and Bow! ... poor me, amongst twenty East-enders![9]

A young scotsman, however, who travelled with three friends, was welcomed to the camp by a ferocious kinsman:

> Arriving at Dunbar ... [we were] met in the squadron office by a sergeant major; I was greeted with "Whaur the hell do you come frae?" He was a Jamieson too.[10]

The first stop for new recruits was at the permanent depot of the corps or regiment in which they had been placed. Here they would undergo an outward transformation into soldiers, and sample the rudiments of army life such as eating in mess halls, sleeping in huts or tents and squadron drill. "During the War all regimental depots were like transit camps, men were coming and going all the time, meals were being served at all hours."[11] Sometimes these camps were inadequate for the huge waves of new recruits sent there. One recruit recalled extra tents and huts hastily erected outside Fort Burgoyne, a large R.G.A. depot, with men sleeping on the ground due to a shortage of beds or mattresses. Another man noted that "we

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had been lost."

[9] J F Thompson, op. cit. letter of 6.10.1917. He felt his position worsen some days later when "four new recruits [arrived] in our hut to-night -- one of which is said to have just come out of prison for theft! Nice!!" (letter of 12.10.1917.) Alfred Hale also found himself sleeping next to "obvious jailbirds", and complained that the public were unaware of "the emptying of the jails of the country and the mingling of decent men in labour camps with thieves and possible murderers." (Hale, op. cit. p.58.)

[10] A.J. Jamieson, IWM 88/52/1, p.3.

[11] Creek, op. cit. p.23. Creek joined the regular army after the war, and rose through the ranks to become a lieutenant. He was thus in a position to comment upon the irregular state of the depot.

slept in an old barn for the first night with rats for company."[12] The eating arrangements were equally inadequate, forcing men "to feed at tables set up outside the tents or in the huts, or to retire with one's food into one's tent and eat it there."[13]

The first days in the army were the most difficult for any recruit, basically because they lacked any code of normality. Civilian life, and all its implications of home, society and occupation no longer applied, whilst the norms of military life had not yet been acquired. For the conscript this period may have seemed even more alienating since his reason for being there was not self induced. Even a Derbyite like Allfree, who had willingly attested, felt himself to be a "victim" by the end of his first day in the army.[14] The eighteen year olds appeared to be most affected, since many had never left home before, regardless of their class or background.[15] And even those who had been making their own way in the world from a younger age were unused to the rigid and impersonal framework within which they suddenly found themselves. Their experience is best summed up by one who wrote that "somehow, the prevalent feeling is -- that I'm dreaming and everything is unreal!"[16]

In fact "surreal" would be a more fitting description of the conscript experience at the regimental depots. The army world revealed itself to be total and self sufficient, functioning

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[12] P G Copson, unpublished account, IWM 86/30/1, p.1.

[13] Allfree, op. cit. p.20.

[14] Allfree, op. cit. p.15.

[15] The public-school boys were a small, and ultimately unimportant minority within this group.

[16] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 18.10.1917.

according to codes that appeared similar to those accepted in a civilian society, whilst they were really dissimilar. Thus a name as a means of identifying an individual was replaced by a regimental number. Each subsequent transfer to another regiment would entail a new number, hence a new identity.[17] Clothing became a uniform, composed of unfamiliar garments such as tight breeches and puttees. Overcoats were rolled when unused, not hung up. Boots were intended for marching, not walking. Food was identified by a familiar name, yet tasted unlike any dish sampled in a civilian environment. A basin was used for drinking tea and not mixing food in. In short, much of the cognitive knowledge and comprehension of daily existence acquired by an individual throughout a civilian lifetime had to abandoned in one fell swoop. In its stead the conscript had rapidly to absorb the alien language of military life, if he were to survive in the army. It appears the military authorities were aware of the problems of alienation, even if they were not necessarily defined as such. In some training camps there were "Old Soldiers" who filled the role of mentor and guide to new recruits, by showing them the technicalities of military life, such as making up army beds and rolling on puttees. These old soldiers were usually men who had been wounded on active service at the front, and whilst recuperating were placed as room orderlies in training camps.

Despite the detailed process of enlistment at the local recruiting office, a large portion of the conscripts' experiences at the depot camp were various bureaucratic and medical procedures. The individual's personal particulars were noted once again, after which he was alloted a

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[17] Where names remained applicable, such as in the weekly pay parade, it was always in alphabetical order. This alphabetical system probably had more far-reaching social implications than envisaged, since it meant that men of a certain draft were always placed together in the same order. As a result friendships were struck up and hence sustained: "The chap in the bed next to me seemed quiet and reserved, but eventually we started to talk, his name started with "C" like mine, and as everything was done in alphabetical order in the army we always were able to keep together." (Creek, op. cit. pp. 22-3.)

regimental number. "Then came our medical inspection, and after stripping we carried our documents with us in the nude, queuing in the long hut."[18]

> Here were several doctors and orderlies and clerks, as well as other victims like myself. One had to strip to be measured, weighed and sounded, and to hop across the room in a nude state, first on one leg then on the other. Your sight was tested, and all the various particulars about you were called out to a clerk, who wrote them on a buff form. I was eventually passed as A.1 and fit for active service abroad.[19]

Another conscript underwent his examination on the morning after his arrival in the depot. The corporal charged with his draft was anxious to be efficient, and thus ordered men to strip in readiness some minutes before they actually entered the examination room:

> When I eventually went into the M.O. I was all goose flesh... the stethoscope was soon on the back and chest, the limbs were tapped and pulled, the eyes and ears tested, the teeth examined and the Medical sergeant who was writing it all down on a form was told A1, will need attention to some teeth.[20]

The thoroughness of these descriptions reflects upon the poor esteem in which the medical examinations administered at the recruiting offices were held: all these men had already been examined and classified prior to their arrival at the depot, yet obviously these medical findings were considered doubtful by the military authorities who were responsible for training.

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[18] Taylor, op. cit. p.21.

[19] Allfree, op. cit. pp. 15-6.

[20] Creek, op. cit. pp. 23-24. He also notes that "I do not think he held my testicles and told me to cough ... perhaps it did happen to some men who complained or were suspected of having a rupture, it was of course a standing joke in the army."

The physical transformation of a recruit was simply wrought by placing him in a uniform.[21] Uniform was not merely the external, visible layers of dress, but every item of clothing required for the daily existence of an individual as a human being and as a combat soldier. A basic kit was:

> ... two tunics. Two pairs of trousers, one overcoat, cap, 1 pair of boots, three pairs of socks, two pairs pants, 3 shirts, knife, fork & spoon etc etc.[22]

In addition the recruit was supplied with the utensils for the upkeep of himself and his uniform: A mess-tin incorporating a plate and a bowl, used for all forms of food and drink,[23] and rudimentary cutlery. Also a razor, toothbrush, shaving brush, button brushes, shoe brush and "even a needle, cotton and wool to mend and darn, all in a canvas holder they called a housewife."[24] One rather pedantic conscript noted that the shirts and braces he was given were "quite okay", but the pants were secondhand, as were the button brushes which were also "rotten". The socks were "fair" and the cardigan was "passable". The razor, toothbrush and shaving-brush were all "atrocious".[25]

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[21] Hair cutting was the second physical change traditionally experienced by new recruits in any army. Only one of the conscripts discussed here documented this activity ("I had my hair cut: it was a prison crop." Copson, op. cit. p.1), whilst only one other mentioned a "barber's tent" in his training camp (Hale, op. cit. p.57). This may be attributed to the existent mode of short hair for men, probably making further cuts seem unnecessary or insignificant, especially in comparison to the other novel activities experienced by new recruits.

[22] E A Pinks, IWM 85/43/1, letter of 4.1.1917.

[23] "It was here that I first experienced making the one plate do for both meat and sweet." Hale, op. cit. p.43. The lack of drinking utensil could be easily overcome by buying a tin mug in a local store, or having one sent from home. In either case it was important that the mug be a bright colour that would stand out and deter theft, which was very common. (Tonkyn, op. cit. letter of 16.3.1917.)

[24] Creek, op. cit. p.24.

[25] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 6.10.1917.

The kit was distributed and signed for by each conscript in the Quartermaster's Store, then the men were marched back to their barrack room or tent where their external transformation took place:

> We were told to take off all our civilian clothing and put on the things we had been issued with, and soon we were pulling on camphor smelling underclothes, and being artillerymen, breeches, puttees and tunics ... it was confusing.[26]

The conscripts' civilian outward identity was then literally packed away, when brown paper and string was distributed and the men were told to make parcels of all their own clothes, apart from their boots.[27] These were then mailed to the conscripts' homes.[28] Some men kept their own underclothes for use as pyjamas, which were not provided by the army, and as a comfort against the roughness of army issue clothing.[29]

The issue of belts was a problem encountered by some conscripts. Belts were an integral part of the official uniform, yet they were often not distributed with the basic kit. Despite the triviality of this accessory, its absence was a great hindrance to a soldier: "I cannot go out of camp till I get a belt."[30] This letter was written two days after the conscript joined up, yet

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[26] Creek, op. cit. p.24.

[27] Due to his apprenticeship as a grocer in which he had made "hundreds of parcels of groceries for farmers wives", Creek ended up wrapping up and addressing parcels for a dozen men. Creek, op. cit. p.24.

[28] In some cases the paper and string were not forthcoming unless paid for. Alfred Hale recorded the remarks of the postman who brought the package he had sent home: "Come from Hounslow I reckon, I have delivered a few in this district and I know the brand. They make the recruit pay for paper and string and they make the Government -- that's the public -- pay too, but paper and string ain't forthcoming when the time comes. How the shoes and socks isn't dropped out and lost beats me." (Hale, op. cit. p.44.)

[29] Creek, op. cit. p.22; Hale, op. cit. p.47.

[30] Thompson, op. cit. postcard of 8.10.1917.

he got a belt only three weeks later, thus throughout this period he could not leave the confines of the training camp. This may have been a military measure for imposing discipline upon new conscripts, by denying them access to civilian life. But another possibility was the presence of "barrack rats" who absconded with equipment,[31] or corrupt Quartermasters who sold the belts to recruits who wanted to leave the camp, instead of distributing them with the basic kit. The Quartermaster at Dover Castle was one such individual, who blatantly demanded a bribe in exchange for a belt. The conscripts eventually organized a stampede on the Quartermaster's Stores and everyone got a belt without leaving a "tip".[32]

Further kit and equipment still had to be issued to the conscripts. This however would be done either at the depot or at a subsequent training camp, in accordance with the aforementioned variations in the schedules of the conscript training experience. Thus for example one conscript got his uniform in the depot on the day he joined up, yet his boots were issued only twelve days later, at a training camp. At this time he was also issued with a "second-hand tunic and trousers for use on fatigues and other dirty work."[33] A week later he got his "equipment": "belt, haversack, pack, ammunition pouches and braces, bayonet prop, rifle sling, entrenching tool and handle etc."[34] Another conscript claimed he got his entire kit of uniform and equipment during the three days he spent at a depot in Chichester;[35]

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[31] "Sometimes recruits suffer because the best equipment is ... diverted by the "barrack rats" who seem to be such a regular feature of depot life." (Holmes, Firing Line, op. cit. p.35.)

[32] Allfree, op. cit. p.30.

[33] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 18.10.1917.

[34] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 25.10.1917.

[35] Adams, op. cit. p.1.

whereas a third recalled getting his uniform only after three weeks, whilst at a permanent training camp, and at last "felt like a real soldier."[36] Lt. Allfree spent his first ten days in the army wearing the civilian suit in which he enlisted, since no uniform was forthcoming; whilst his boots "wore out with continually marching about on rough gravel."[37]

A conscript remained at the depot only for a period of days, two weeks at the most. Once he was in uniform, the medical examination completed and a regimental number alloted, the main function of this station in his training had been completed. One man recalled spending just a few hours in a depot, being kitted out on the spot and then moving on.[38] Very few regretted leaving these camps, which were very anonymous and alienating: "You were nobody's child here -- you belonged to no particular unit and no one took much interest in you."[39] Thus following the system established by the training of Kitchener's New Armies, recruits would be sent from the depot in groups "to the training centres where the task of organising them into battalions and other units was largely carried out."[40]

Once arrived in these centres, accommodation and food became central to the conscripts' training experiences, since they reverted from the military existence to one of basic humanity. Both issues were also crucial in forming the conscripts' attitude to training and army life in general. If the sleeping accommodation was comfortable, and the food good, or at least

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[36] Bradbury, op. cit. p.2.

[37] Allfree, op. cit. p.22.

[38] Jamieson, op. cit. p.3.

[39] Allfree, op. cit. p.24.

[40] Simkins, Kitchener's Army, op. cit. p.191.

palatable, an individual's attitude would be far more favourable than if the reverse were true. Moreover, an individual expected to find solace in food and sleep, and felt himself to be cognizant with these issues from an early age. If he was faced with unknown elements of both, his feelings of disorientation might be much increased.[41]

Due to the difficulties in creating enough training camps for the huge influx of recruits throughout the war, accommodation often posed a problem for the army and thus the conscripts.[42] The most common form of army housing was in huts, specially erected for this purpose, and bell tents. The latter, however, were inadequate as long term accommodation under harsh weather conditions. Thus in camps in which no other solution could be found men were sometimes billeted with local families during the winter.[43] Conscripts usually enjoyed this experience since it ensured home cooking and a warm bed.[44] Housing in proper buildings was also considered a stroke of exceptional luck by many who had lived in huts or tents.[45] These, in turn, appeared luxurious to the conscripts who were housed in a closet pan

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[41] For a full discussion of these conscripts' feelings of disorientation and alienation see below chapter on "Identity and War."

[42] For a detailed survey of these problems and their solutions within the army framework, as established in the volunteer period, see: Simkins, op. cit. ch.9. The discussion here will therefore reflect only those issues singled out by the conscripts themselves.

[43] Army policy was against billeting as far as possible, since it was deemed expensive in comparison to hiring buildings or constructing camps. Statistics of the Military Effort, op. cit. p.834.

[44] P R Hall was billeted with a family during the winter of 1916, due to lack of accommodation in his own camp at Wivenhoe. He noted that "we were very kindly treating." P R Hall, unpublished account, IWM 87/55/1, p.3.

[45] Allfree, op. cit. p.29.

factory whilst training in Queensborough. When in production, the factory molded the pans, which were then left to dry on racks made of battens and wooden uprights:

> The uprights were about 6 feet apart, the shelves were about 4 feet wide between the aisles and about 2 feet above each other. There were four or five tiers... Each of two large sheds held about 250 men... We were given one section of rack each to stow kit and sleep in. This worked out to a space 5'9" x 2' x 2' so it was close packing. We were baked in summer and frozen in winter as in the latter case no heat was provided... a convict prison would have been preferable as regards accommodation. It was a vile place. Huts or tents would have been paradise but anything was good enough for common line troops.[46]

Even if one was not housed in a factory, lack of space was a prevalent problem in the conscripts' training experiences. In August 1914 the army had accommodation in barracks for 174,800 men.[47] This meant that with the first wave of volunteers "the cubic space allowed per man was reduced from 600 cubic feet to 400 cubic feet,"[48] and often also far less. Thus in a Machine Gun Corps training camp in Grantham one conscript noted: "Slept four in three beds."[49] The beds themselves usually comprised some kind of straw mattress placed on a wooden board.[50] Training camps that dated to pre-war days also had iron bedsteads:

> [These] were in two parts and the bottom half was pulled out until it met a slot which secured it to make a six foot length bed with six legs. There were three small air mattresses which fitted the bed and a paillasse (sic) stuffed with straw for a pillow, two blankets one to hold the mattresses in position and one for cover. These blankets stunk of sweat and camphor.[51]

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[46] Cobb, op. cit. p.3.

[47] Statistics of the Military Effort, op. cit. p.833.

[48] ibid.

[49] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 3.5.1917.

[50] "[My bed] consists of 3 horse-rugs I should call them, and a sort of straw filled sack for a mattress, lying on three boards raised about 6 inches from the ground. Also a sort of bolster stuffed with rotten straw." (Thompson, op. cit. letter of 6.10.1917.)

[51] Creek, op. cit. p.22.

Food and meals were the best documented issues in the writings of these conscripts, since natural appetites were much enhanced by the physical rigours of training. The army provided its recruits with three meals a day. Breakfast usually comprised bacon or kippers with bread, either on its own or with margarine or dripping, and tea. Lunch, or "dinner" comprised meat in some form, such as pie, stew or boiled beef, which was always accompanied by potatoes and often also another vegetable. If a pudding was served it was "watery boiled rice with currants or raisins floating about in it ... one sometimes got bread pudding or a slab of jam tart."[52] Tea, served at the end of a day's training, which was usually in the late afternoon, was always a slab of bread with jam and margarine, accompanied by tea.

In absolute terms the quantity and quality of army food was probably questionable, but put in the context of civilian expectations it became an interesting class indicator. Thus a somewhat privileged young conscript wrote:

> This morning we had for breakfast a concoction which was described to me by my neighbour as "troipe and onions" -- none use (sic), I COULD NOT, so went on bread and margarine.[53]

Whereas another eighteen year old conscript of a lower middle class background claimed:

> With regards to grub it is very good considering we are in the Army, we have pudding of some description nearly every day for dinner besides some sort of meat & vegetables so it is not bad is it? it is better than I thought for.[54]

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[52] Allfree, op. cit. p.32. His main comment on the main meal of the day was its lack of accompanying bread or salt.

[53] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 13.10.1917.

[54] E A Pinks, op. cit. letter of 7.1.1917. It must be noted that within the context of this correspondence the comment was written as an objective assessment, and not in a vein of irony or as an attempt to pacify his worried mother.

With the passing of time most conscripts got used to army provisions, yet food remained crucial in determing a conscript's attitude to his training experience. Thus a conscript who had apparently quite adapted to camp-life, was moved to another training camp after two months in the army; whereupon he noted: "Absolutely fed up ... grub awful, served in the hut. Milk pudding more like soap."[55]

The quantity of food available was a much more serious issue. In his book, F.A.J. Taylor recalled that as an eighteen year old recruit he was permanently starving, a situation which was worsened by all the physical exercise in training. He often assuaged his hunger by scrounging from canteens and shops, and slipping into two sittings of dinner.[56] In most camps the rations were sufficient, at least as a basis that could be supplemented by food parcels from home or the offerings of the YMCA hut. Yet this was not always the case. Late in 1917 one conscript recalled that "all hell broke loose ... [with] the stamping of hundreds of hobnailed boots on the wooden floor" when the daily ration of a slice and a half of bread was cut to one, and then replaced by two biscuits.[57] The next day bread appeared once more on the tables. Another man wrote of

> a riot on Wednesday over the food question. They have been cutting it down, it was bad enough on the march but its been getting worse & on Wednesday a lot of chaps broke out & we had to get a lot of fellows ... with fixed bayonets to go & break up the rioters. They raided all the canteens of the different regiments ... until the bayonets came on the scene & that ended the trouble without bloodshed ... & <u>incidentally</u> the food has increased so it has done no harm in one way, but it was rotten while it was on.[58]

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[55] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 4.5.1917.

[56] Taylor, op. cit. pp. 26-33.

[57] ibid. p.33.

[58] S Pinks, IWM 85/43/1, letter of 18.5.1917.

The writer was an instructor in a training camp, and later an NCO, who was conscripted in 1916. His observations, written in mid 1917, actually reflected upon the basic problem of feeding the conscripts in training i.e. the food shortage in Britain by this stage of the war.[59] Men who were already in the battlefield had first priority in the allocation of food, and even they did not always receive sufficient supplies.[60] In addition, conscription also removed more agricultural labourers from the field into the army, therefore diminishing food production.[61]

Even in camps in which the meals served were satisfying, the problem faced by all conscripts was that no food was provided after tea. Thus throughout the evening men had to supply themselves or go hungry: "I soon learnt what Army grub was like, and the whole of my

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[59] In 1917 "the matter that caused most anguish ... was food supply. In May it was said to be the one subject the House of Commons cared about." (Trevor Wilson, The Myriad Faces... op. cit. p. 513.) Commodities that were in short supply were potatoes, sugar and butter, whilst the price of meat rose dramatically: "...in April 10/- would buy only the equivalent of 3/6d. before the war." (ibid.) Early in 1918 food rationing was introduced.

[60] For a discussion of this issue see below "Mud and War."

[61] It must be noted, however, that only 35% of the male agricultural work-force enlisted in the army. (Together with the mining sector this was the second lowest percentage after the railways, which gave only 28%.) Thus out of a pre-war figure of 800,000 male labourers, 281,000 were in khaki in July 1918. Both in relative and in absolute terms these figures are low. Yet regarding conscription, it appears that the majority of these men were taken between 1916-1918, since only 15% were enlisted by July 1915. (Statistics taken from: P.E. Dewey, "Military Recruiting and the British labour force during the First World War," op. cit. p.204.) These low figures resulted from a combination of factors: The relatively low standard of physical fitness of this workforce (Dewey, pp. 212-3), government attempts to keep up a food supply, and the efforts of local tribunals, manned by local men, to keep their workforce. In a paper on the Leek Local Tribunal as a sample of the operation of local tribunals throughout the conscription era, Keith Grieves notes: "As the manpower problem grew more acute in the last two years of the war the military tribunal papers indicate that a conflict arose in the allocation of the available labour supply. The withdrawal of men from industry and agriculture in Leek for military service was not supported by the local tribunal." K.R. Grieves, "Military Tribunal Papers: The Case of Leek Local Tribunal in the First World War" in Archives, vol. xvi, no. 70 (October 1983), p.150.

money went in food to make up for the wretched grub we received."[62] Three main solutions to the problem were available: Food parcels from home, teashops in local villages or the resident charitable hut, such as the Salvation Army or the YMCA. Most men appeared to have received parcels, and it was the habit to share these with one's room mates:

> [I] have had one half [of an apple pastry sent by his mother] for tea today -- of course I had to share it with those near at hand.[63]

The parcels represented a much needed link with home, whilst village life and the teashops offered a comforting glimpse back into civilian life. One conscript recalled that "Mrs Watson's wee sweetie shop alongside the billet did good business from the frugal earnings of the troops."[64] Alfred Hale wrote of a cottage near his camp in Thetford, where suppers for the troops were provided at a reasonable price:

> There I had a good meal of eggs and bacon with a cup of coffee, the whole not badly cooked or served by any means. I had supper at this cottage most evenings while at Thetford.[65]

Another conscript, who had been in the army for some weeks, wrote his family of a "novelty" in restaurants in Mansfield:

> ... hot meat pies and peas ... and a very nice dish it is for 4d. I sampled two plates last night. ... We have not had very large meals today yet, but two previous days, our food has been alright, but we can't rely on it and ten to one it's short when we are hungry.[66]

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[62] Bradbury, op. cit. p.1.

[63] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 16.10.1917.

[64] Jamieson, op. cit. p.5.

[65] Hale, op. cit. p.51.

[66] Hynd A, IWM WWI 78/4; letter of 20.10.1917.

This latter comment made the recreation huts provided by a church or a charitable institution an indispensable fixture in all army camps, including overseas. A cup of tea and a bun for a penny a piece, besides much else -- such as 12 or 14 stewed prunes for 2d[67] -- could be purchased there. Soldiers of all classes considered them a solace:

> I should like here to pay tribute to and express my appreciation of the Y.M.C.A. who provided ... large recreation huts where food and refreshments, and one might say all the necessaries of a soldier's life could be purchased at the most moderate prices... They provided a need for soldiers that the government made no attempt to supply.[68]

The final option for obtaining supper after hours was not always open to all soldiers: "... after I have written this [letter] ... I'm going to adjourn for my supper at four and a half d. per pint."[69]

Purchases were often made possible due to the weekly pay parade, which was a focal point of the conscripts' existence. The basic rate for a Private soldier was one shilling per day. For many this was the only source of funds to which they had recourse, which made the cheap rates of the YMCA hut most appealing. Others, who were luckier, had supplementary funds sent from home;[70] whilst older men of professional standing had an independent income.[71] At first sight, especially to those unused to earning a wage due to their age or social class,

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[67] idem, letter of 25.11.1917.

[68] Allfree, op. cit. pp. 20.21.

[69] S Pinks, op. cit. letter of 15.5.1917.

[70] S Pinks, letters of 7.6.1917 and 28.8.1917, in which he thanks his parents for the "enclosure" in letters he received from them. Such a practice was prevalent in many letters of young middle class men.

[71] "How I recollect procuring pen and ink and sitting at a table trying to write a cheque, as I wanted some money from the bank, or to pay a bill perhaps. Fancy a private like me with a cheque book! Why, only officers had banking accounts and cheque books." (Hale, op. cit. p.56.)

the system of payment appeared confusing: "[it] is very complicated. Apparently one never gets one's exact amount of pay, it is sort of debit and credit idea."[72] In actual fact the pay parade, which took place every Friday, was very simple and methodical:

> When we draw our pay, the Company lines up in platoons and each platoon sorts itself out into alphabetical order. Some weeks one platoon is paid first and the following week a different one... Some weeks the A's go first and others the Z's,[73] so it is always a bagatelle as to whether you will get finished early or not. When your turn comes you file up to a table where an officer and a sergeant are sitting. You remove your hat, and shout your name and regtl. no. (sic) (in a loud voice). The sergeant looks at a list and says "seven shillings" to the officer. You present the flat part of your hat to the officer and he places thereon the named amount. You say "thank you Sir" and hop it. We march through pretty rapidly when the marching gets oiled.[74]

Pay day was also the occasion in which deductions owed the army by a soldier were made. One conscript had a pair of boots stolen in his first week in the army, whilst they were displayed for parade. "Although I had carried out orders I was compelled to pay 27/6d for a new pair, at a rate of 2/6d per week, and as the officer changed from one pay parade to another during the eleven weeks an explanation had to be given as to why I was restricted to one shilling, the obligatory minimum which any soldier had to be paid."[75]

A medical experience common to all conscripts was vaccination and inoculation.[76] The anti-

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[72] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 9.10.1917. His pay appears to have been a constant worry to him: " I hear that I do get paid for hospital -- so there will be about 4/- due to me -- when I get it, which will probably not be for two or three weeks." (letter of 21.11.1917.)

[73] "Being a "C" was a big advantage as one was always near the front for pay ... during the whole of my service I only knew the "W"'s to start first once." (Creek, op. cit. p.23.)

[74] Tonkyn, op. cit. letter of 24.3.1917.

[75] Jamieson, op. cit. p.4.

[76] Not all recruits needed both since childhood vaccination was sometimes adequate in later life, thus leaving only inoculation. Only two conscripts record receiving both: Tonkyn, op. cit. letters of 9.3.1917 and 16.3.1917; Thompson, op. cit. letters of 12.10.1917 and

tetanus vaccination was given within days of joining up, usually even in the depot camp. The anti-typhoid inoculation was then administered in the following weeks, but no longer than a month, in a training camp,[77] with a second one, if needed, somw weeks later.[78] Though it is clear none of the men knew what they were being inoculated against, the event was singled out in the minds of most conscripts. This is probably due to the feeling of physical discomfort the procedure evoked, especially after the inoculation, and the accompanying rest period. Most men "suffered in varying degrees some painful but temporary after effects,"[79] the most common affliction being a stiff arm. For this reason drafts were left to rest, given sick leave or put on light fatigues for the following forty eight hours. One man even noted going on a furlough after inoculation.[80]

The need for inoculation alongside other measures for the preservation of public health in the army, and especially the training camps in England, was clear in light of the many references to epidemics of various kinds.[81] One conscript noted that "Ripon [training camp] was many times placed out of bounds owing to outbreaks of contagious disease;"[82] whereas another

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29.11.1917.

[77] In one case in which a draft was rushed through training a conscript noted: "Were to have been vaccinated on the left and inoculated on the right arm. Only the latter was done." P G Preston, IWM M6/160-167/1, diary entry for 6.6.1917.

[78] A typical schedule for these injections was noted by one conscript in his diary: Enlistment, 7.8.1916; vaccination, 21.8.1916; first inoculation, 8.9.1916; second inoculation 6.10.1916. (Bennet, op. cit.)

[79] Taylor, op. cit. p.21.

[80] Adams, op. cit. p.1.

[81] For a detailed discussion of public health in Britain during the Great War see: J.M. Winter, The Great War... op. cit. Part II.

[82] Bradbury, op. cit. p.2.

recalled his hut being in isolation, due to one of the men being a disease carrier. After two weeks the original forty men were reduced to twenty, but rations were still supplied for the original number: "That fortnight was probably the only time I spent in the British army when I was full to repletion."[83] Men were conscripted from the entire spectrum of British society, regardless of the cleanliness of their homes or the history of disease in their area. Thus despite the various medical examinations described above, it was clearly not always possible to isolate a man carrying the germs of an infectious disease such as measles or spotted fever.[84] Moreover, due to the clause providing for conscientious objection in the 1907 Vaccination Act, and its application to the army, it was not possible to enforce inoculation upon every individual soldier. From the start of the war questions were raised on this issue in Parliament; and Lord Kitchener put out an appeal for inoculation to all men who enlisted, quoting the casualty statistics from typhoid during the Boer War (from 57,684 cases 33% (19,454 men) were invalided, and 13.9% (8,022 men) died).[85] The debate continued throughout 1915, and once conscription was introduced the House was assured that "a soldier who is deemed to have been enlisted under the Military Service Bill will not be deemed to have consented to vaccination."[86]

Given the crowded conditions of the training camps, the danger of epidemics was much increased. Hence the need to isolate those afflicted by a disease was coupled with the need to preserve the health of the remaining men:

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[83] Taylor, op. cit. pp. 25-6.

[84] Also known as spinal meningitis, a highly infectious and deadly disease.

[85] The Lancet, 22.8.1914, p.522.

[86] Parliamentary debate of 25.1.1916, quoted in the Lancet, 29.1.1916, p.275.

> There are a few cases of measles in the camp and there is some talk of isolating the camp. If so we may not be allowed to send letters. They take great care of us and we gargle our throats night and morning and snuff disinfectant up our noses at the same time to kill the germs.[87]

Another conscript claimed "we gargle with Condy's Fluid twice a day"[88] as a precaution against spotted fever, since several men afflicted with it had been isolated in the camp. In these cases the measures were effective and the fear of an epidemic passed. Another conscript recalled being less lucky: A week after his draft arrived at a training camp in Dover an epidemic of spotted fever broke out. All the men were confined to the barracks for three months, at the end of which time eighty men had died. One week later the entire camp was put under confinement for a further two weeks due to an outbreak of scarlet fever.[89]

The interaction, both social and sexual, between the conscripts and the civilian population in England posed further possibilities for the spread of disease, and hence epidemics within camps. Besides visits to shops and tea rooms in local villages or towns, men also went on home leave or furloughs, thus making contamination from a distant location possible. Due to the nature of these writings there were very few references to any sexual activity by the conscripts. This was to be expected, since it would not be deemed acceptable to write to one's mother about sexual experiences, nor to recall them in a memoir written for an audience of strangers. The only explicit reference to the issue is made by Alfred Hale, who wrote that many men in his camp were "carrying on ... to the extreme point of sexual intercourse ...

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[87] Tonkyn, op. cit. letter of 14.3.1917.

[88] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 19.3.1917.

[89] Copson, op. cit. p.1.

[with] girls of the prostitute class."[90] Another man claimed more coyly that next to the factory building in which his unit was billeted was the house "of a notorious female "The Black Diamond" [who] was so attractive to one eighteen-year-old, that ... he married her, who was old enough to be his mother."[91] The two other references to sexual activity found in these texts were written by men conscripted at the age of eighteen, who found the matter shocking: "... to be a 'real' soldier I was told that I must get syphilis or some such disease ... I was determined never to become a 'real' soldier."[92] Much the same sentiment was expressed by the young man who was sent on guard duty in a V.D. camp, where the inmates exposed themselves in order to shock him.[93]

The army was clearly aware of the problems of disease, sexual or otherwise, and besides precautionary measures also imposed severe confinement upon men who were carriers:

> One night after being allowed home on evening leave, I was found to be a carrier of Spotted Fever. For a week I was incarcerated in a cell beneath the Tower Bridge Road, and at the end of that week I was found to be a victim of German Measles, and was taken to a fever hospital in Homerton. When I recovered I was allowed home on sick leave... [that same evening] I received a telegram informing me that I was to report at once to a Military Hospital in Mitcham ... I was one amongst about 200 other men from all regiments, and at last after six weeks I was returned to my regiment ... as a clean patient.[94]

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[90] Hale, op. cit. p.107.

[91] Jamieson, op. cit. p.5.

[92] Barraclough, op. cit. p.1.

[93] Taylor, op. cit. p.41.

[94] Cox C H, unpublished account, IWM 88/11/1, p.1.

"Clean" may also be taken in its literal sense, as a measure for the preservation of public health in training camps. One conscript noted that all new arrivals in his training camp had to have a bath,[95] and that "it is ABSOLUTELY COMPULSORY for everyone to have at least one bath per week."[96] But neither of these claims are repeated in any other writing examined here. Moreover, when this conscript moved to another training camp he complained about not having a bath for over a week: "Apparently we have to wait till we are told to have one -- and they do not seem to care much when you have one."[97] Overall, it must be noted that there were relatively few references to bathing or related activities, beyond the daily habit of washing and shaving.[98] The latter was an army regulation,[99] from which it may be surmised that the military authorities were more concerned with the appearance of a soldier than his cleanliness. Yet the army did provide expedient bathing facilities in the camps:

> There are little baths about 3 ft square and about one and a half ft deep. Then there is a shower above and you can have hot or cold water. It seems an awfully easy way to bath. You just soap yourself over and let yourself get under the rain.[100]

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[95] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 6.10.1917.

[96] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 12.10.1917. Thompson was obsessed with cleanliness due to a bad skin rash, for which he was hospitalized several times throughout his training.

[97] idem, letter of 20.12.1917.

[98] Shaving proved to be a problematic issue for some men. Those with foresight, and money, brought a safety razor with them upon enlisting, or had one sent to them, since the army issue razor "could cut fast enough, and no mistake." (Hale, op. cit. p.70.) Some men were used to being shaven in a barber's shop, and thus had to learn how to shave themselves. For them an afternoon break in a local village brought great respite, since it offered a visit to the barber and a shave.

[99] "They're fearfully keen on your being quite hairless about the chin!" (Thompson, op. cit. letter of 9.10.1917.)

[100] Tonkyn, op. cit. letter of 14.3.1917.

Laundry was a further aspect of cleanliness which was little referred to in the writings of these conscripts. As with bathing, awareness of this subject appeared to be linked to a class related civilian habit. Men, and especially the younger ones, who were accustomed to bathing and a regular change of clothing prior to their conscription, made a point of trying to preserve these habits even as soldiers. Thus when washing was mentioned in these writings it was mostly by young men who wish to impress upon their mothers that they are still looking after themselves properly i.e. in the manner in which they were educated:

> You ask me about the under flannel, I have given the one I had to come down in to one of the corporals along with my other washing ... [he] takes the washing home to his wife.[101]

The army made provision for the laundering of five military garments per soldier.[102] Men who required more items washing, usually their own underwear, often mailed them home for this purpose,[103] or paid for them to be laundered by local women. Indeed, it is most likely that the conscripts' lack of documentation of their laundry arrangements reflects upon this being "women's work" in which they had little interest.

The military training experienced by the conscripts differed little from that received by the volunteers before them, and as such has been extensively documented.[104] Within the

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[101] E A Pinks, op. cit. letter of 24.1.1917.

[102] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 21.10.1917.

[103] Alfred Hale notes that in his camp army laundry was submitted on a weekly basis, and then despatched to the local village. "Later on I was to send my dirty linen home to be washed by Mrs Ling [his housekeeper] and returned clean with her weekly parcel of things to eat." (Hale, op. cit. p.92.)

[104] See for example: Simkins, op. cit. ch. 12; Denis Winter, Death's Men, op. cit. ch.2; Wilson, op. cit. ch. 22. Nearly all of the many published memoirs of volunteer soldiers and officers, and novels based upon their experiences, document their training. See for example: Ivor Gurney, War Letters, (The Hogarth Press, 1984), Part I; Sue Richardson (ed.), Orders

existential framework discussed above, days were spent in various forms of drill, route marches, lectures and fatigues. The first weeks were devoted to squadron drill, in an attempt to instil the basic cohesion and obedience "whereby complex patterns of behaviour could be set in motion by the briefest of instructions."[105] In addition, drill "make[s] men look like soldiers but, far more important, it makes them feel like soldiers."[106] For an army charged with creating combat soldiers in the shortest possible time, this was undoubtedly an important priority.

On the whole drill was considered "a most tedious occupation, and when you were breaking in new Army boots it was a most painful one also."[107] Given the uneven, and often poor physical condition of many conscripts, as discussed in the previous chapter, great emphasis was also laid upon physical drill. These preparatory weeks then gave way to a much increased and varied training schedule: "We have been on musketry to-day, gas drill, bayonet fighting etc."[108] "Route march 12 miles, afternoon, physical drill."[109] One conscript summarized five months of training in one sentence: "We had grenade throwing, firing rifle grenades, night op's, gas drill, bayonet fighting and firing on the range."[110] However, it appeared that

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are Orders: A Manchester Pal on the Somme, (Neil Richardson, 1987), ch.2; George Coppard, With a Machine Gun to Cambrai, (HMSO, 1969); Ian Hay, The First Hundred Thousand, (Penguin, 1941). On the theories and uses of basic training, see for example: Dixon, On the Incompetence... op, cit. ch. 15-16; Holmes, Firing Line, op. cit. ch.2.

[105] Dixon, On the Incompetence... op. cit. p.171.

[106] Holmes, Firing Line, op. cit. p.43.

[107] Allfree, op. cit. p.23.

[108] E A Pinks, op. cit. letter of 9.2.1917.

[109] B W Hughes, op. cit. diary entry for 25.1.1916.

[110] Copson, op. cit. p.3.

the conscripts' physical condition improved at a slower rate than the ever-increasing rigours of the training schedule:

> I think what made me fell queer was a route march which we went for yesterday morning we started about 8 & got back about half past eleven, we marched nearly 9 miles altogether so you can guess with drill again all afternoon, & gas drill for an hour in the evening that it was enough to knock me up.[111]

The writer was an eighteen year old, and thus supposedly one of the fitter conscripts. Yet he had enlisted just over three weeks before writing that letter, clearly an inadequate period of time in which to improve his physique. But one week later the training load was increased further:

> We have been doing some skirmishing to-day, one side attacking the other in other words a sham battle, & it does take it out of you rushing up & down hills falling down etc etc ... they do rush us through our training & no mistake.[112]

For an older man, such as Frank Gray who was conscripted in 1917 at the age of forty, these physical exertions were even harder:

> For a "man of forty, or approaching that age, who has turned soldier probably after six years of sedentary life and little exercise, when he falls over three strands of barbed wire in twenty yards is very far from laughing when he picks himself up."[113]

Skirmishing incorporated within it another important aspect of training:

> We were in two tanks facing one another, and were strictly enjoined by the instructor to look as fierce as possible!! Can't say I am particularly in love with basic training at present -- it's too much like the real thing![114]

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[111] E A Pinks, op. cit. letter of 24.1.1917.

[112] idem, letter of 1.2.1917.

[113] Gray, Confessions of a Private, op. cit. p.30.

[114] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 6.11.1917.

Thompson's dislike of the fierceness which brought him closer to the "real thing" probably stemmed from two major human impulses: aggression and the fear of death. The endless and repetitive drills in an environment similar to a battlefield, were designed to diminish the latter. Thus a soldier who received insufficient training actually suffered mental inadequacies in battle, alongside physical ones. Aggression, on the other hand, is an inherent instinct which is suppressed within the individual throughout his upbringing.[115] Hence an order to show aggression is basically an entreatment to discard a lifetime of inhibitive conditioning. But once released, aggression must also be trained if it is to be of use to an organized armed force, especially if its supposed target is in a trench many yards away: "It is much more difficult to feel spontaneously hostile towards an enemy you cannot see."[116] Moreover, this instinct is of an exceedingly individual nature, and thus its training must also be directed towards group cohesiveness, whilst also ensuring it is focused only upon the enemy. Hence in the exercise described above the men were first organized into groups and then enjoined to be aggressive.

Discipline is an inherent element of militarism designed to induce hierarchial acceptance of orders, as instilled in drill, and to ensure that the exposed aggression is not turned upon the individuals within the hierarchy. Thus, in effect, military training rests upon a paradox: Half

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[115] Freud claims that "all the impulses which society condemns as evil ... are of this primitive kind... These primitive impulses undergo a lengthy process of development before they are allowed to become active in the adult." He goes on to note that these impulses are transformed by an internal factor i.e. the egotistic need for love, and an external factor, which is "the force exercised by upbringing, which represents the claims of our cultural environment, and this is continued later by the direct pressure of that environment." (S. Freud, "Thoughts for the Time on War and Death: I. The Disillusionment of the War," in Civilization, Society and Religion, op. cit. pp. 68-9.

[116] Dixon, op. cit. p.171.

the time is spent exposing and refining the instincts of aggression within the recruit, whilst the other half is spent drilling severe obedience into him.

Work fatigues, apart from being a source of labour, were an intrinsic part of military discipline. These did much to instil a sense of hierarchy, and especially the Private soldier's place within it. A cookhouse fatigue, which was a "rotten dirty job,"[117] or days spent moving 20,000 blankets,[118] left an individual in little doubt as to his standing. All soldiers also suffered from the element of army discipline known as "bull", and the conscripts were no different:[119]

> 6.5.1917 Realise what army discipline really is. Wind up properly.
>
> 7.5.1917 Another day of strict discipline. 3 hours squad drill, slow march ... Officers and N.C.O.'s proper terrors.
>
> 14.5.1917 Particular grievance today. Sergt. Roper made us double round for quarter of an-hour. Result everyone up in arms. What's the use though.[120]

Within this description of discipline it is interesting to note the opposing emotions of "wind up" and "what's the use." That these were expressed within the space of a week may point to the effectiveness of that element within discipline which imposes fear of punishment. Indeed, it may also reflect a slow adaptation to military codes. However, taking the last entry of May 14, it may also point to the fact that in the case of the conscripts, the imposition of a military identity was much more difficult to establish.

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[117] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 1.4.1917.

[118] Hughes, op. cit. diary entries for 20-23.1.1917.

[119] For a discussion of these conscripts' attitude to discipline see below "The Institution and War."

[120] W L Fisher, op. cit.

Basic military training lasted for approximately six weeks. At the end of this period recruits went on to receive professional training within a particular branch of the army. As shown in the previous chapter, the corps within which a conscript would serve was usually decided upon in the recruiting office. In some cases this would reflect upon a specific military specialization, such as artillery, and thus the entire process of training would take place within one camp. In others, the selection of an exact profession would be decided upon during training. Here also choice was sometimes possible: "Went to Avington Park [during first weeks of training] for examination for Machine Gun Corps. Decided to join."[121] Yet in most cases military considerations, of some sort, ruled the day: "I was posted to the 9th Battery & being just over 5 feet 6 ins (sic) became a gunner. Those below 5 ft 6 ins were drivers."[122]

The training period laid down for Kitchener's New Armies was six months,[123] yet according to the writings examined here in which the length of training was noted, five months was the average.[124] As with the entire process of enlistment and training, the rule became but a vague guideline in the face of developments in the battlefield. Thus some men enjoyed a complete course of training which "lasted for nearly 5 months ... [at the end of which] I was regarded as a fully trained gun layer."[125] Others, like H L Adams, were sent out to France

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[121] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 20.4.1917. Fisher had initially enlisted in the Civil Service Rifles.

[122] Hollingsworth F, unpublished account, IWM 82/21/1, p.1.

[123] Simkins, op. cit. p.296. Wilson notes that it took seven months to train the first New Army (Wilson, op.cit. p.250).

[124] Only twenty of the conscripts' writings examined here document the element of time in their training experiences.

[125] Hollingsworth, op. cit. p.1.

with just three months training.[126] In some cases professional courses would be completed, but essential training in trench warfare would be hurriedly sped through due to an imposed date of departure: "Went through gas and threw bombs in the morning, thus compressing our 8 weeks course into half a day."[127] If the state of war permitted, supplementary training would sometimes be given in the base camps surrounding Etaples in France. This issue was probably best summarized by a Derbyite who enlisted in mid 1916: "I was fortunate in getting full training -- later in the war over-young conscripts were being sent to the front with criminally little training and experience."[128]

The final two weeks of training were spent preparing for the imminent, though unspecified departure for France:

> They tell us that we shan't go across till Friday now, but it is like everything else in the army, we don't know until we wait & see... [today we were] making wills & doing other pleasant jobs.[129]

Spare kit was also handed in, and combat kit issued: a gas helmet with box respirator, caps, goggles, vests, body belts, field dressing and steel helmets.[130] War kit inspection would follow, and often also a ceremonial parade before a high ranking officer. This last was obviously meant to inspire the men by making them appear important in the eyes of a dignitary. Yet conscripts were often not impressed: "A general came to inspect the brigade

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[126] Adams, op. cit. He was conscripted on November 6, 1916, and was sent out to France on February 9, 1917.

[127] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 10.8.1917.

[128] Hall, op. cit. p.1.

[129] B Davies, IWM 83/31/1, letter of 11.4.1917.

[130] E D Bishop, IWM 77/111/1, diary entries for 1-11.1.1917.

but I saw nothing of him."[131] Or: "The whole battalion was inspected by two Field-Marshalls from the War Office -- I suppose to see whether we are fit or not."[132] In the eyes of some the conscripts were still seen as volunteers, as a Derbyite recalled when king George V inspected his unit: "... he stopped by me and asked my age. I said I was nineteen and he smiled -- I was slim built and looked young and I suppose he thought I had lied to get into the army."[133]

The last activity of training, common to all soldiers, was embarkation leave. Alongside a preoccupation with food, the desire for leave was a theme that ran throughout the writings of all these conscripts.[134] Thus one diarist charted his training experiences alongside his expectations for leave:

> 1.5.1917 Notified to go to M.G.C. on the 3rd. Great disappointment as we were going on draft leave on the 7th. Jolly hard lines.
>
> 6.5.1917 Great improvement in grub ... Leave definitely off.
>
> 29.6.1917 New O.C. Course. Hopes of leave very bright, but after last week's disappointment afraid to hope.
>
> 30.6.1917 Went on leave.
>
> 2.7.1917 Back to camp. Don't feel too bad in anticipation of more leave at end of course.[135]

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[131] Acklam W R, IWM 83/23/1, diary entry for 18.9.1916.

[132] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 24.6.1918.

[133] Hall, op. cit. p.3.

[134] For a full discussion of this issue see "The Institution and War."

[135] W L Fisher, op. cit.

Even conscripts who reduced their training experiences to a few lines always mentioned leave: "I had several leaves from here [a training camp] and finally seven days draft leave."[136] Letters home were always full of discussions of leave, either as a heartfelt sentiment: "[I] hope now it won't be long before I can get leave,"[137] or as a reply to a family query:

> [Christmas leave is] VERY IMPROBABLE ... If Pa could concoct a reasonable excuse -- someone coming home from the front or something -- I would apply for weekend leave soon, but it's hopeless without some excuse I'm afraid.[138]

These references, and many others beside them, point to the strong ties the conscripts felt to the homes they left behind. As such, they lead to the issue of the conscripts' identity, which is central to this dissertation, and will be examined throughout the following chapters. It may therefore be apt to take as a starting point these conscripts' own summaries of their training experiences. Regarding the physical aspect, there appeared to be a general agreement that all the drilling and exercise very much raised their standard of fitness. "My girl and the folks at home were surprised how I had filled out, put on weight and looked disgustingly fit and well."[139] That this sentiment was expressed in all the types of writings examined here reflects both upon its importance to the conscripts themselves, and on their general physical condition as a population. Thus a clerk noted in his memoirs:

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[136] Copson, op. cit. p.3.

[137] E A Pinks, op. cit. letter of 12.2.1917.

[138] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 7.12.1917.

[139] Taylor, op. cit. p.34.

> This time of training had been on the whole an enjoyable period of fresh air exercise which had benefitted us all.[140]

Another conscript wrote to his family: "I am keeping fit so far and that's a big item I suppose."[141] Whilst a diarist made several entries such as: "Feeling much better for the changed life and developed voracious appetite."[142] And his family also detected a physical change in him, when he went on leave: "Everyone surprised at how well I looked. I suppose 5 months in the army has made a difference."[143]

Thus one aim of basic training, the physical transformation of a civilian man into a soldier, appeared to have been successful with regard to the conscripts. One eighteen year old conscript summed up this period by noting that "I became much harder, both in body and soul."[144] Yet one may ask whether his soul, hardened though it was, belonged to the army in any way? In other words had he, and his fellow conscripts, established a military identity at the end of the training period? Overall, this does not appear to be the case. The external appearances of uniform and physical fitness, alongside the professional capabilities of fighting, existed within each individual's pre-conscription civilian consciousness. Moreover, this was apparent in all age groups. An eighteen year old conscript wrote after five and a half months of training: "I am simply longing for the time to come when we are all together again, what an absolute treat it will be when that time comes."[145] Lt. Allfree was glad to be posted

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[140] Fisher R D, IWM 76/54/1, p.1.

[141] S Pinks, op. cit. letter of 15.5.1917.

[142] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 18.3.1917.

[143] idem, diary entry for 30.6.1917.

[144] Barraclough, op. cit. p.1.

[145] E A Pinks, op. cit. letter of 17.5.1917.

to Dover Castle, since it enabled him to get weekend passes to visit his family who lived close by.[146] Another married man noted explicitly that "I fear all I enjoyed was evenings at Sheerness where my wife later came to stay."[147] Whilst he was on leave one diarist noted that he "spent ... [the] six days making the best of my time giving no thought to returning."[148] Lt. Creek probably summed up this attitude best when describing his feelings upon departing for embarkation leave after five months of training: "... but best of all we were individuals again."[149]

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In his chapter on basic training Richard Holmes defined two functions for it. Firstly, its aim is to instil "an adequate level of training in such things as weapon handling and minor tactics." Secondly, it tries "to ensure that the individual values which prevail in most civilian societies are replaced by the group spirit."[150] As for the first, one may deduce from this chapter that all these conscripts became trained and equipped soldiers of some kind, even if the process which brought about their transformation was unpredictable. The fact that they did become soldiers with a degree of shared experiences, pointed to the existence of some

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[146] Allfree, op. cit. p.24.

[147] Cobb, op. cit. p.3.

[148] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 20.7.1917.

[149] Creek, op. cit. p.36.

[150] Holmes, op. cit. p.36.

system. The particularity of these experiences in terms of length, location and content bears witness to the fact that the army into which they were conscripted was an organization with a rigid, intentionalist structure, that had suddenly become functional.[151] In other words, as a pre-war professional organization it had processed a relatively small number of recruits through a fixed and detailed training programme, from which they emerged as soldiers. Throughout the war, this organization had to apply the same, or slightly modified process of training to a much greater number of troops, who were often unsuited to military life. Moreover, in some instances this had to be done without adequate equipment, and also in a shortened space of time. The accomplishment of any training in these circumstances pointed to a functional response to the situation imposed by war, which in itself fluctuated in accordance with developments upon the battle field. Yet it was the original intentionalist structure of the army within which this functional training programme took place.

It was this paradoxical combination of rigidity and functionality within the wartime army that most affected the identity of the conscripts. Taken from a civilian existence governed by normative codes, they were thrown into a system which put severe physical and spiritual demands upon them. Whilst drill instructors instilled a physical transformation, the army did not provide the tools for a mental process of adaptation. This was left to the individual himself, who fell back upon the only support known to him, which was civilian. Thus if it

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[151] Thus for example "... over one million men [1,138,070] joined the army in the first full year of compulsory military service [1916] despite the many administrative problems." (Grieves, The Politics... op. cit. p. 28) Before August 1914 the entire regular British army (which did not include the Territorials) numbered slightly less than 250,000 men. But it was the infrastructure of this comparatively minuscule corps, much enlarged in a functional but unsystematic manner, through which all the wartime recruits were processed. It was undoubtedly an incredible feat, but one which made uniformity of training, or any other experience, impossible.

were the tea-shops in a village, letters to and from home, or a permanent yearn for leave -- the conscript comforted himself by evoking images from civilian life, with which he identified strongly. As a result, the conscript was still a civilian in uniform, and not a soldier. It is therefore not surprising that at the end of their period of training the conscripts retained their individual civilian identities.

This singularity, however, did not countermand the existence of a group spirit of some kind. This was apparent from the writings of the conscripts who returned to the training camps from embarkation leave, and awaited their departure overseas. In this period of waiting they were effectively in a state of limbo: no longer fresh recruits who had to be drilled into the semblance of soldiers, yet, having never experienced battle, not quite fully fledged combat soldiers. Irrespective of their attitude and enthusiasm for this vocation, it is obvious that these men were now very cognizant of the army's framework and their position within it. A comparison of the two main journeys made by the conscripts to the training camps -- as new recruits, and as soldiers on the verge of departure to the battlefield -- confirmed this position. Whereas the first, as noted above, is often described in terms of alienation, isolation and fright, the second presents images of men adjusted to each other and their circumstances:

> "I met a dozen of our fellows on Waterloo & we all came down together [from embarkation leave]... We had a fine journey down. Everyone packed his troubles in his old kit bag & we were very cheerful."[152]

Thus the period of training had obviously instilled a manner of camaraderie and sharing within these men, that was clearly appropriate to a sense of common destiny -- or fear. This, in turn, may be viewed as a group spirit of sorts, albeit not one that replaced "individual values", as in Holmes' definition. The orientation of the group was circumstantially military,

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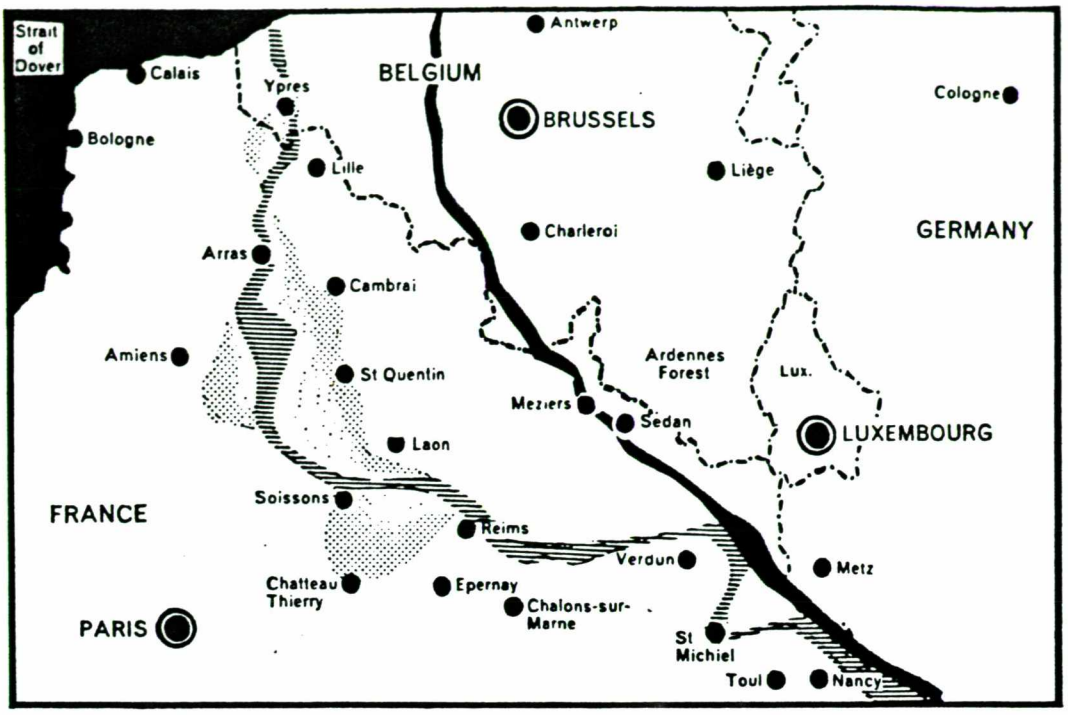
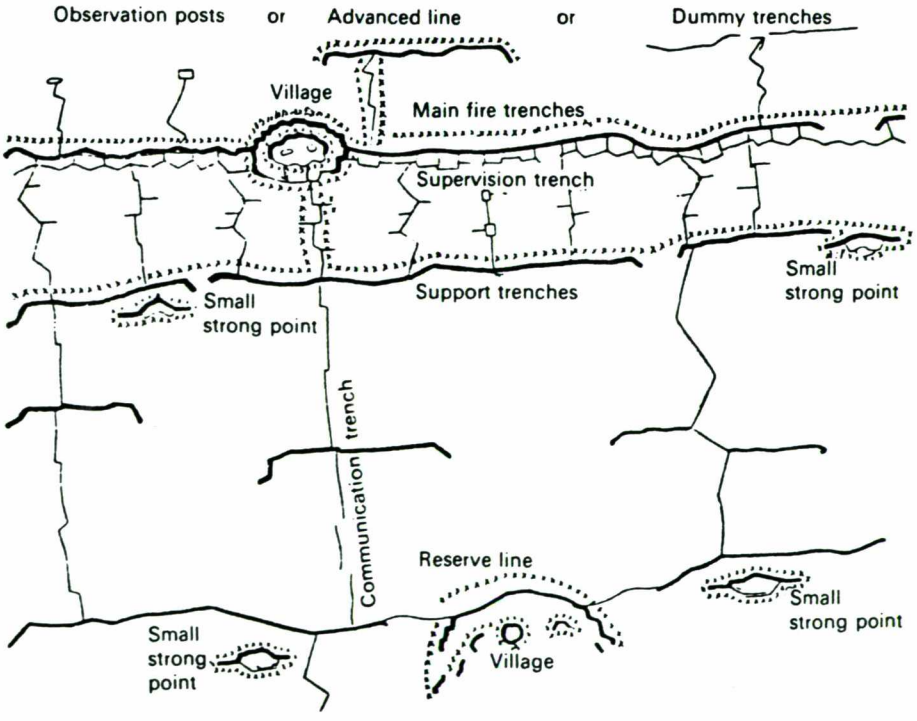
[152] Davies, op. cit. letter of 11.4.1917.

whilst the individual within it retained his civilian values and identity. It now remains to be seen whether the demands of trench warfare would redefine the identities of the individual or the group.



Map showing the whole of the Western Front, 1914–1918 (the dotted area represents the extreme advances of both sides; the horizontally lined area shows the Western Front for most of the war (1914–17); the darker line shows the Armistice line of 1918).



A typical British trench system.

The wet wind is so cold,
And the lurching men so careless,
That, should you drop to a doze,
Winds' fumble or men's feet
Are on your face.

("The Troop Ship", Isaac Rosenberg)

Chapter Six: To France

The physical departure from Britain was very significant to the conscript experience, for two reasons. Firstly, most conscripts would never have set foot on foreign soil in the normal course of their lives, hence the actual occurrence was unique. Secondly, the change in geographical location also heralded the final shift in their status: from men enlisted for military service to combat soldiers on Active Service. This chapter will therefore explore the implementation and experiences of these conscripts' removal to the continent.

The end of the official training period was probably best marked in the minds of most conscripts by their embarkation leave. Yet once returned from it their departure to France was often postponed for some days, even weeks. As noted in the previous chapter, troops rarely knew the exact date of movement, despite it being expected: since the career progress of an A category soldier was from training to the combat zone, the termination of the first could only signify the commencement of the second. In comparison to his knowledge of future movements whilst at the front, here the conscript was actually in command of some information regarding his fate, albeit unspecific. This was probably yet another aspect of the

army's imposed functional nature,[1] since many such decisions were often taken at short notice, alongside a general policy of keeping recruits uninformed of their whereabouts and future movements. This ambiguous situation was well summarized in the following letter:

> We were all ready last night to start away this morning, & just as we turned in one of the Sergeants came into the hut & told us all we weren't going to-day, for some reason or other ... & now we don't know whether it will be to-morrow or Thursday, but anyway I expect it will be some time this week; don't the Army like to unsettle you?[2]

Despite the delays, the day of departure was still special, even shocking for most men: "One suddenly realizes that the time of training is at an end, that one is at last on Active Service."[3] These conscripts appear to have attached a near-mystical significance to this title, as if their new status emanated from the words themselves and not from the physical activity of departure. One conscript, who numbered all his letters home, even commenced a new serial upon embarking for France i.e. "First letter on Active Service."[4] In the same way another man marked every Saturday in his diary as the number of weeks in which he was on Active Service.[5] Indeed, army regulation ensured that all future correspondence from overseas would be marked with this phrase, thus giving an official seal to the distinct status of combat soldiers, both in their own eyes and from the civilian perspective.

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[1] A description of the experiences of a Regular battalion that crossed to France on August 10, 1914 clearly emphasised that from the start of the war exact schedules and troop movements were indeterminate. Thus on August 6 the battalion moved to Dorchester, and the officers were told that "our stay was indefinite," yet on August 9 they were told that "we would start again to-morrow." (Dunn, The War the Infantry Knew, op. cit. pp. 6-8.)

[2] E A Pinks, op. cit. letter of 5.6.1917.

[3] W B Henderson, unpublished account, op. cit. p.1.

[4] Tonkyn, op. cit. letter of 10.6.1917.

[5] Bennet J, IWM 83/14/1.

The schedule of departure on the day itself also contributed to its uniqueness. The days of uncertainty would come to an abrupt end with the call for a draft that was to leave within hours. One conscript claimed his draft were given six hours to prepare,[6] whilst in another case the call came late in the evening, in preparation for the following morning:

> Draft consisted of about 90 men and owing to early hour of departure all sober and comparatively quiet... Great fun, exchanging goodbyes with everyone.[7]

The latter comment highlights the emotional aspect attached to any act of leaving, which in this case was also compounded by the knowledge that the parting was in order to go to war. Thus one conscript recalled being "deeply moved" by "a special tea and an address from the colonel"[8] given just prior to the draft departing. Another man noted that "quite a fuss made of us this morning as we are "on draft."[9] The "fuss" was really an extended round of farewells, from pals and superiors alike. This moment of informality with the latter undoubtedly added another overtone of novelty to the day, especially as it appears to have been structured into a procedure approaching a "ceremony of informality":

> The Roll was called, & then the Regimental Sergeant Major came & shook hands with each one & wished us all "good luck"... Our old platoon sergeant shook hands as we came on to the parade ground... Sergeant Bates -- we all autographed his 2 photographs this morning.[10]

The formal ceremony of departure as constructed by the army was also designed to induce emotion into the event. The men on draft usually marched to the railway station through the

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[6] Henderson, op. cit. p.1.

[7] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 11.8.1917.

[8] Copson, op. cit. p.4.

[9] F R Jolley, IWM Department of Documents vd., diary entry for 11.6.1917.

[10] Tonkyn, op. cit. letter of 10.6.1917.

streets of the nearest town, often preceded by a brass band playing familiar tunes. One conscript recalled singing a popular song "that had caught the fancy of the Army -- as, indeed, of the whole population of the country -- with its silly chorus:

'Good-bye-ee / Don't cry-ee'."[11]

Emotion was difficult to withstand under these circumstances, which were specifically designed to emphasise the warrior status of these men in comparison to the civilian bystanders who often cheered them on, or gave them "a rousing send-off."[12] Hence the surprise of one conscript "at the apathy of passers by who were going to business. Thought they might have given us a cheer as we were going out to fight."[13] The pride of the soldier as warrior was actually very much dependant on the civilian admirers he left behind:

> No end of girls came on the platform and said goodbye to the boys, some crying. It made me think -- I won't say what ... one thought seemed uppermost in my mind. I was at least doing my duty, and with the band playing our 'march past' and the cheers from the crowd on the platform outside the train, it made one feel proud to go.[14]

The men themselves also sometimes contributed to the ceremonial aspects of departure, thus probably acknowledging the importance of the day. One eighteen year old conscript recalled the populace of Sheffield lining the streets and cheering on his draft as they marched to the railway station:

> Many of us had bought small union jacks with which to brighten our march through the streets ... When we paraded that day, ready to march off, we had attached these little flags to our rifles.[15]

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[11] Henderson, op. cit. p.7.

[12] Jamieson, op. cit. p.5.

[13] Jolley, op. cit. p.1.

[14] Copson, op. cit. p.4.

[15] Abraham, op. cit. p.9.

Thus the training camp and its inhabitants had become familiar enough to inspire some emotion upon leaving, even for those men who initially recoiled from their fellow conscripts as being socially unsuitable.[16] In other words, the military training camp had become a fixture of normality in the lives of these conscripts.

Once on the train bound for an unknown port of departure,[17] usually Folkestone or Southampton, the conscripts commenced a new stage of socialization. A draft was often composed of an entire group that trained together, but it was almost always amalgamated with other units from the same training camp. On the train, or at the quayside, they were joined by units from other camps and "old soldiers" who were returning to the front after recovering from wounds or being on leave. One conscript, who crossed to France in March 1918, noted that he knew only three of the six men with him in the train carriage that took them to Portsmouth. His description, which was that of a typical draft, also reflected upon the state of the army at this time and the necessities imposed upon it by the war:

> Three of the men I did not know. The corporal and one of the privates I knew slightly. They were old caterpillar drivers, [who] had been invalided home on two separate occasions on account of illness caused by exposure and were now going out for the third time. The Lance-corporal, newly promoted, had been training in this country for over three years but owing to defective eyesight had never been sent abroad. Chance had thrown us together a little at Avonmouth, and we had found a few common interests and experiences.[18]

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[16] See above chapter 5, Basic Training.

[17] This is probably yet another aspect of the functional character of the wartime army. Dunn recorded the officers sitting on a train in August 1914, "guessing where we were off to. Southampton was voted as most likely." (Dunn, op. cit. p.8.)

[18] Henderson, op. cit. pp. 2-3.

Another aspect of this interaction between units in unconfined spaces such as stations, trains and ports was the possibility of desertion. Despite men being in uniform, the above description makes it obvious that units intermingled, thus making supervision much more difficult. One conscript recalled "the voice of the Sergeant-Major calling out that no one was to leave the train under threat of dire penalties."[19] Once arrived in a port more delays were probable, sometimes necessitating an overnight stay in a transit camp. In this instance another conscript noted in his diary: "Am now warned not to leave barracks as absence from roll call means liable to be tried by District Court Martial."[20]

Overall, the day of departure was exceedingly long, a typical schedule for it being: "Parade [in the training camp] 3 o'clock AM. entrain 5.30. Reach Southampton 12 noon. Embark 6 o'clock PM. Leave 10 o'clock PM. Reach Le Havre 7 AM."[21] There was very little for the men to do in these hours of waiting, other than talk amongst themselves, walk around the docks, read or play card games. This pattern often also repeated itself once the troops were on board. One conscript recalls spending 36 hours on the boat, "though only a very small part of that time was actually spent in motion."[22] Another summed up the hours before the journey thus:

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[19] Hale, op. cit. p.131.

[20] Acklam , op. cit. diary entry for 29.9.1916.

[21] Bishop, op. cit. diary entries for 12-3.1.1917.

[22] Henderson, op. cit. p.9.

> We went aboard at 5 o'clock and lay in dock till dark. Making tea and 'Housy Housy'[23] seemed to be all there was to do. A great crowd of fellows was on board the ship which was the Manx packet boat 'Ben-my-Chree'.[24]

Upon embarking each man "was issued with a life belt which had to be worn until our arrival at Le Havre in the early hours of Monday morning. Each party on the ship (about 100 to a party) were issued rations which had to be served out by the sergeant or officer in charge."[25]

Most of the writings examined here describe the crossing in terms of the origin and quality of the vessel, and the overcrowded conditions. One conscript noted in his diary that it was a "rotten little paddle boat;"[26] whereas another estimated that he had crossed with 1,200 men "in a small transport boat which in better times had been a pleasure steamer."[27] In a letter to his parents one eighteen year old claimed to have "thoroughly enjoyed the trip," whilst also noting that

> the boat was very crowded -- I saw soldiers of practically all the Allied armies on board -- most of them returning from leave. It was one of the old cross-channel boats that we've watched coming over dozens of times.[28]

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[23] A card game very similar to bingo, also known as "House": "This ... was the only game allowed ... which could be played for money as all other gambling games were strictly forbidden... Each one has a card with numbers on & the man who is running the game has a bag of numbered counters which correspond to the numbers on the cards. He pulls out a number from the bag & shouts out the number. each player will scan his card & should such number appear He will put a small stone on it. The winners are those who get all their numbers covered first, or else a line covered... Vast numbers played this game." (Jolley, op. cit. p.6.)

[24] Cobb, op.cit. p.5.

[25] Holdsworth E, IWM 73/147/1, p.1.

[26] W Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 12.8.1917.

[27] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.1.

[28] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 5.7.1918.

In his case the duration of the crossing was just two hours, but for most it was much longer, often lasting the entire night. One man recalled that the men on his ship reached France in "none too pleasant a temper" since the boat proceeded in a "ghostly manner" due to many stops along the way.[29] In addition, smoking was prohibited as a precaution against light, and talking was limited to whispers. Under these conditions sleep was the only possible option, yet the crowded conditions made this exceedingly difficult:

> It was necessary to lie curled up for one's feet were close to another man's head and on each side we were wedged in tightly.[30]

In other words it was "a case of 'sardines in a box'," [31] as one conscript put it. It was therefore not artistic licence but observation of fact which led Isaac Rosenberg to describe the men as "Grotesque and queerly huddled" in his poem "The Troop Ship". One conscript found sleep impossible under such circumstances and therefore went up on deck, where an officer sent him down for guard duty in the horse deck, which was densely populated:

> ... my duty being to walk up and down to see that no one struck a match. Found this by no means an easy task as fellows were laying about all over the place & being pitch dark found myself walking on one or two & now & again getting roundly cursed.[32]

The troop ships sailed across the channel under cover of darkness, escorted by battleships and destroyers. The necessity of all these precautions became clear to one conscript who took a walk around the docks in the hours before embarkation:

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[29] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.3.

[30] Henderson, op. cit. p.9.

[31] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.1.

[32] Jolley, op. cit. p.2.

> [I saw] Two large ships in dry dock that had been torpedoed. They had terrible gashes in their sides in the neighbourhood of the engine room ... Not a pleasant sight to see as we were going on board ship later on.[33]

This man was to describe many more unpleasant sights once he arrived in the battlefield, most of them far worse than merely unpleasant. Yet this was his initial contact with the consequences of war, and as such it gave him pause to consider his future circumstances. Most conscripts, however, did not witness such tangible evidence of the war before reaching France, and their impressions of what lay ahead were based mainly upon the stories imparted by the "old soldiers" with whom they were travelling:

> It's a good thing for you fellows that you have two old hands going out with you. We'll soon show you what can be done with a sheet. We'll rig up a cosy little shack. Of course it isn't all bad life out there. There are always the "staminays" [estaminets] and the "vinn blank".[34]

In some cases the army authorities also saw fit to provide some vision of their expectations from the men they were sending abroad:

> [We heard] A stirring harangue by the O.C. [Officer in Command] supported by sleek S.M.'s [Sergeant Majors] and sergeants of the Training Group. We were urged to go in and win. Give Jerry all the results of Bayonet, Grenade and Rifle training we had so well (?) (sic) absorbed. Give Jerry Hell! -- and we went off to do it.[35]

Overall, however, the conscripts' process of adjustment to the circumstances of being on Active Service was influenced mainly by intimate experiences of overcrowding, boredom, uncertainty and iron rations. Since these were to be the prominent elements of their daily existence in the trenches, the cross-channel journey was very informing as a preparatory experience. However, as in the case of basic training, they were not provided with any mental vision or framework that would prepare them for the non-physical implications of war.

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[33] ibid. p.1.

[34] Henderson, op. cit. p.4.

[35] Cobb, op. cit. p.4.

Therefore their thoughts during the crossing[36] dwelt upon the element of departure from England, with which they were familiar, rather than upon the unknown that lay ahead in France. The issue, and the journey, are best summed up by a conscript who crossed to France late in August 1916:

> Few of us had ever before left our native land, and certainly none upon an errand such as this. And the War, after raging for a couple of years, had lost its original glamour. Moreover, we were only amateur soldiers, so for most of us our state was not a happy one; yet we were not miserable, having no idea what was in store for us on the other side of the Channel.[37]

Once a troop ship reached the shores of France more delays were probable. Alfred Hale recalled arriving outside Havre at 7 am, yet disembarking only at 11 pm "owing to accident to propeller."[38] Another conscript noted that after a long and turbulent crossing disembarkation was delayed for four hours due to an unknown reason, after which the men were kept waiting on the quayside for a further hour. As a result "many gave way to cursing and swearing."[39] The most common reason for delays in entering a port was bad timing. Since the crossings had to be undertaken at night, the army could only schedule departures according to favourable tides on the British side of the channel. Therefore ships often reached the French side at low tide, making it necessary for them to wait for the tide to come in. In one very detailed account of a crossing the author claimed his ship anchored off Havre at 5

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[36] The issue of alienation and identity will be discussed in the final chapter of Part II. However, one reservation must be noted here, which is that the data on this phase of the conscripts' consciousness is found only in the written accounts examined for this study, thus from a posthumous point of view. No contemporary record, i.e. a letter or diary mentions it.

[37] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.2.

[38] Hale, op. cit. p.133.

[39] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.3.

am but only entered the port at 2 pm: "We were eventually towed into the dock by a tug & were loudly cheered by the French people on the quay."[40]

Aside from cheering crowds, that were not always in evidence, the docks served as an initial introduction to France, and as such were often a disappointment:

> It was almost impossible to believe that I was in France at all. The docks of ____ (sic) so very like the docks of London or Liverpool or Glasgow that if it had not been for occasional notices in French I could easily have imagined myself in England or Scotland.[41]

Indeed, the dock workers were mostly English, and once disembarkation began the quayside became "packed with Tommies -- every Regiment, every uniform -- a never ending stream pouring from Britain to France, Scotties mixing with Colonials & even coloured troops."[42] Thus it was only upon leaving the docks that the conscripts became acquainted with France as a foreign land.

Boulogne and le Havre were the two ports in which the troop ships usually docked. Etaples was the large base camp close to the first, whereas a camp near the town of Harfleur served the latter. One young conscript who passed through it on his march to the camp wrote his parents that "my impressions of the town were awful smells & general dirtiness & dustiness! Millions of French kidlets in blouses -- you know-- running all over the place."[43] These

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[40] Jolley, op. cit. p.2.

[41] Henderson, op. cit. p.15.

[42] Lt. W E Glasgow, IWM 73/223/1, letter of 27.7.1917.

[43] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 5.7.1918.

children feature in most initial descriptions of France,[44] as do the impressions of dust and dirtiness. Yet these were often simply a reflection of the men themselves, as they marched for miles heavily laden down:

> It was a good 4 mile march along a dusty road on a hot day & as we had to carry all our equipment we had quite enough by the time we reached camp... Along the road we were besieged by French children asking for "biskeet" & as they seemed to appreciate them more than we did they got all they wanted.[45]

Many conscripts arrived at Etaples, which was a huge camp that could accommodate approximately 100,000 troops at any given time during the period 1916-1918.[46] A conscript who arrived there early in 1918 "got the impression of bees swarming in and out of hives."[47] Men would spend up to three weeks in this camp, depending upon the latest war developments, and hence the reinforcements and replacements needed in the front line units. At a time of relative calm they would receive much needed extra drilling on the infamous "Bullring,"[48] alongside lectures and practical training in trench warfare. At other times men would spend no more than a night at the camp, before being divided off into smaller groups and thence sent up the line. As a result, alienation was strongly felt in this camp, since, like

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[44] Robert Graves, who arrived in le havre in 1915, was accosted by "numerous little boys ... pimping for their alleged sisters." (R. Graves, Goodbye to All That, (Penguin, 1979), p.79.)

[45] Jolley, op. cit. p.3. Army biscuits, as will be explained below, were notoriously hard and difficult to eat. This same conscript had first encountered them on the troop ship, noting then that "it was impossible to bite them through until you had worried them with your teeth for a long time & by that time all your jam or jelly had either dropped off or got all over your hands & clothes." (ibid. p.2.)

[46] Denis Winter, Death's Men, op. cit. p.72.

[47] Taylor, op. cit. p.47.

[48] This was "a large dreary expanse used by Napoleon as a parade ground." (E D Vaughan, Some Desperate Glory: The diary of a young officer, 1917, (Frederick Warne, 1981), p.3.)

the base depots in which the conscripts commenced their training in England, it was intended for processing huge influxes of men over short periods of time. Upon arrival men were "regrouped"[49] or "paraded alphabetically & were then alloted to our tents. Letters G H I & J going to "B" lines. This had the effect of splitting up the various little groups of friends that had chummed up coming over & one found oneself again amongst strange faces."[50]

The only form of accommodation in the Etaples camp was bell tents with wooden floors, pitched in long lines:

> At the top end was the sergeant's tent who was in charge of that particular line. The tents were crowded out. In mine there were 18 men & we had a rare job to put out kit & find room for ourselves. At night when all were in there were more feet to the pole than there was room for so that the feet had to pile on each other. It was a good job it was summertime as the door was left open & gave more air. I am sorry for the troops who came there in winter.[51]

A young conscript who spent three weeks in Etaples in February 1917 proved him right on this point. He was alloted two blankets, which were inadequate for warmth, and due to ground-frost the inhabitants of his tent awoke to find their water bottles and boots frozen. They had severe problems in getting the latter on, "and owing to the absence of water were denied the luxury of a wash for that day."[52] In Harfleur, which was also a large camp, the accommodation was more varied: "On either side of the highway were endless rows of wooden or iron huts, many surrounded by gay little flower gardens planted and tended by the men; there were innumerable white tents in long straight lines as far as the eye could see

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[49] Taylor, op. cit. p.47.

[50] Jolley, op. cit. pp. 3-4.

[51] ibid. p.4.

[52] Adams, op. cit. p.2.

along the valley."[53] But here also conditions could be unpleasant in colder weather: "Got served out with two blankets, one of which was quite wet."[54]

The base camps emerge from these writings as well organised and strict establishments, perhaps surprisingly so in view of the overall functional state of the army, as noted above:

> This place was like a huge machine turning out finished troops by the tens of thousands every day & everything was done strictly to time table & with very few intervals. In fact had they not done so there would have been a terrible confusion as the whole valley was full of troops as it could possibly be.[55]

In Harfleur the daily regime started with reville at 4.30 am, whereupon the men rose, washed themselves in a pail of water, polished their brass buttons and boots, and ate a hasty breakfast. By 7.00 am they were ready for the day's exercises, complete with full pack (weighing 65 lbs in the case of infantrymen) and rifle. In summer men frequently fainted from the heat and weight upon them, since the training ground, "a big plateau,"[56] was at the end of an uphill march.[57] All the elements of basic training with which the conscripts were acquainted from England were practiced here, in addition to more practical preparation for the front: "We ... marched off about 8 to some trenches about a half an hours march from here, & we were in same till about 10 o'clock last night, we had to do it just for practice you see, & had our dinner & tea in them."[58]

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[53] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.3.

[54] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 3.10.1916.

[55] Jolley, op. cit. p.4.

[56] Cobb, op. cit. p.4.

[57] Bishop, op. cit. p.4.

[58] E A Pinks, op. cit. letter of 19.6.1917.

In Etaples the routine was practically identical, except that the daily training was held on the Bullring. This name was derived from the word "bullshit", which was military terminology for drill and other forms of repetitive training.[59] In addition, the instructors on this training ground were notoriously obnoxious, treating the troops rather like cattle,[60] and putting them through "violent exercises of all kinds, including bayonet drill, gas drill, climbing, jumping etc."[61] Trench digging and building positions with sandbags were also practiced.[62] In addition, each corps exercised its professional military skills such as wiring and bombing. A gunner recalled being marched to the gun park for a test in gunnery: "Certain marks of proficiency were awarded which had a bearing on your ultimate destination. A good "layer" for instance being sent right up to the guns while the less efficient went either to the wagon lines or DAC."[63]

Overall, however, the training regime in the base camps presented these conscripts with very little innovation, beyond the degree of violence to which they were exposed. As one of them put it to his brother: "It is much the same as at Minster as regards training, only of course we

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[59] For an explanation of the phenomenon see for example: Dixon, On the Psychology..., op. cit. ch.16; Holmes, Firing Line, op. cit. ch.2.

[60] "The purple, pompous, strutting dugout officers and the brazen-voiced NCO's clinging to their safe jobs and yellow armbands seemed to take pleasure in insulting the fighting men." (D. Winter, op. cit. p.73.) "... they had a S.M. [Sergeant Major] there called Black Jack who was a "holy terror"... He thought nothing of running a man for the most trivial offence & giving him pack drill so that he became cordially hated by all artillerymen who passed through the base. It was said afterwards that he was killed in a row with some Australians who refused to put up with his bullying way." (Jolley, op. cit. p.4.)

[61] R D Fisher, op .cit. p.4.

[62] Adams, op. cit. p.3.

[63] Jolley, op. cit. p.8.

are under canvas instead of in huts."[64] The exception to this general statement was the gas training given in the base camps, and most especially the gas tests. Most conscripts received rudimentary instruction on gas warfare and the use of respirators during their training in England.[65] More intensive practical instruction was reserved for the short period in which conscripts spent in the base camps in France.[66] Lt. Allfree noted that "recruits coming out to France were always very nervous of gas, and their ignorance with regard to it was appalling."[67] Thus men who simply passed through a base camp for one night were actually being sent to the front with insufficient gas training.

The poison gas test was sometimes held in a sealed tent, but more usually in a wooden hut,

> with notices up at either end warning one to have one's mask properly fitted on after passing a certain point, and the word 'dangerous' in large letters on a notice board close to the entrance... We approached the hut in single file, and entering, passed through one by one, and so out into the open air outside. It was nothing but one long passage with windows on one side only.[68]

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[64] E A Pinks, op. cit. letter of 12.6.1917.

[65] Gas warfare commenced with a German attack on the British line in Ypres in April 1915. This form of warfare progressed with the war, and thus there were constant innovations both in the respirators themselves and in the instructions about their use.

[66] "Allied anti-gas schools were set up at Havres, Rouen, etaples, Abbeville, Boulogne and Calais. Every soldier was put through a standard course which included an hour immersed in a cloud of gas (to give him "confidence in his respirator") and half a minute exposed to tear gas (to give him a fright and teach him to take anti-gas precautions seriously). Masks had to be put on in a regulation six seconds -- but before being allowed to do so, and while still exposed to the tear gas, men had to repeat their name, number and battalion." (R. Harris & J. Paxman, A Higher Form of Killing: The Secret Story of Gas and Germ warfare, (Chatto & Windus, 1982), p.16.)

[67] Allfree, op. cit. p.59.

[68] Hale, op. cit. p.134.

Alfred Hale was not very affected by this experience, but another conscript noted in his diary that "we were all nearly choked so don't know what a real gas attack can be like."[69] The tear gas test was usually held in a tent or a trench,[70] at the end of which the men "were like so many children all crying, the tears rolling down our faces."[71]

Another feature of life in these camps was a medical inspection:

> This took place in a large hut & a batch of men marched in & told to strip naked. Rather a shock for a sensitive person but it had to be done. We then passed in a line in front of the M.O. The following questions were then fired at you. "Eyes alright? teeth alright? quite alright? jump over that chair!" This was the time for any imperfections to be noticed. Fellows with bad feet such as hammer toe bunions or flat feet were given a ticket to see the chiropodist. Those with bad teeth one for he dentist & those with eye trouble the optician. There seemed to be a department for every possible complaint.[72]

This gunner had his civilian spectacles exchanged for army issue within two days. Another conscript claimed he was passed as A1 after his medical examination in Etaples.[73] Since the conscripts had been medically examined in the recruiting office and in the training camps, this third examination points to serious deficiencies in the physical standard of the conscripts that had been sent to the front.[74] It was clearly as a response to this problem that this extra medical examination was instated in 1917.

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[69] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 4.10.1916,

[70] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 14.8.1917.

[71] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.1.

[72] Jolley, op. cit. pp. 4-5.

[73] Adams, op. cit. p.3.

[74] See above chapter 4, "Enlistment," note 44, in which an officer complains of the physical condition of conscripts arriving at the front.

Food and meals appear to have been an issue in which the two central base camps were unequal. Undoubtedly the task of feeding such huge numbers of men in one location was immense, and its implementation in both cases was quite remarkable. Yet it appears that in Etaples the camp was better organized in this respect:

> The meals were all taken in large mess-rooms of which there were several & large queues formed up in front of each about 5 deep & regulated by Military Police for all the world like lining up for the pictures or the theatre & each room had two sittings so that if you were not well to the fore you had a long wait for your meal. The food was good here and fairly served out.[75]

But the quantity of food allotted each soldier in Etaples was less satisfactory:

> On many occasions after finishing my first meal I would come out and again take my place in the queue for a further meal. On some occasions it was necessary to do this three times in order to get a decent meal.[76]

In Harfleur the food was "not as good as when we were at Minster & we don't get as much either but must put up with it eh?"[77] In both camps breakfast was eaten early, before the day's drilling began. But in Etaples the men were marched back to camp for a large meal in mid afternoon, whilst in Harfleur this occurred later in the day. Thus in this location the local French peasants set up barrows on the edge of the training ground from which the troops bought snacks such as oranges, chocolates,[78] "and the eternal Spearmint. They seem to think we can't win without [it] and that it is the staple article of sweet in the English army."[79] Only in the late afternoon were the men marched back to the camp for a meal, which was

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[75] Jolley, op. cit. p.5.

[76] Bradbury, op. cit. p.5.

[77] E A Pinks, op. cit. letter of 20.6.1917.

[78] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.5.

[79] Bass Lt F, IWM 77/94/1, diary entry for 16.9.1916.

both dinner and tea. This was set out on the end of long trestle tables, and as a result "it was the noisiest and the greediest who seized most of the rations."[80]

As in the training camps in England, the men had to provide for themselves after tea, or whatever was the last official meal of the day. Due to the size and organization of the camp in Etaples, this was not difficult: "There were all kinds of places for the troops to spend their evenings such as the YMCA, Salvation Army, Church Army etc & in all these places you get a mug of tea coffee or cocoa & cakes of various kinds & even a fair meal at very low charges."[81] Descriptions of the facilities in Harfleur are similar, and in both cases parcels from home provided a welcome source of food and home-cooking. This option, however, was open only to those men who spent longer than a few days in either of the camps, since their families had to be informed of their new address.

The conscript's departure from the base camps was as sudden as their previous departure from the training camps in England: "We didn't know ourselves till about 9.30 last night, after we had all turned in the Orderly Sergeant came round & told us we were all to be prepared to go up the line to-morrow night which is to-night."[82] Another conscript recalled being awoken at 1 am in preparation for leaving two and a half hours later.[83] The men returned the small amount of kit which they had received upon arrival, such as blankets, and were then issued with line kit:

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[80] ibid.

[81] Jolley, op. cit. p.6.

[82] E A Pinks, op. cit. letter of 25.6.1917.

[83] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.7.

> This consisted of 2 blankets, a ground sheet, 50 rounds of small arm ammunition & emergency rations viz 1 tin bully, a tin containing tea & sugar, & a small quantity of small oval biscuits. These all tied up in a white calico bag & instructions given us that these were not to be touched until ordered to do so by an officer. An order that was obeyed by very few, the tea & sugar being too much of a temptation to the chaps when nothing could be obtained at nights.[84]

Departing drafts were usually composed of men who had crossed to France together, though not necessarily of men who had trained together: "About 100 of us promiscuously picked out to go up to the front but neither Adams nor myself although most of our friends have gone ... No system of picking out these men at all. Sub just walked down the ranks and picked out a man here and there."[85] The men were divided off into groups, according to the needs of the various units to which they were being sent. A typical summary of this situation was given by a gunner: "I was among the group of the 31st Division & of all those who had come over with me, only 2 were with me for this division so of course we 3 stuck together."[86] In W V Tilsley's autobiographical novel Other Ranks, the Derbyite hero Dick Bradshaw felt

> Rotten that he, Platt and Wilson should have been parted and sent to three different units after being so long together at Codford and Witley; and all three afraid to approach that big bull-necked Sergeant-Major to see if he could arrange for them to go up together. Were all drafts split up indiscriminately now, all nominal rolls so strictly adhered to?[87]

A march to the nearest railway station was again preceded by a short ceremony, in which "the C.O. came out and addressed us about duty, and the chaplain said a few words."[88] One man

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[84] Jolley, op. cit. p.9.

[85] Bass, op. cit. diary entry for 28.9.1916.

[86] ibid.

[87] Tilsley, op. cit. pp. 7-8.

[88] ibid.

noted in his diary that the chaplain in his camp delivered "a rather bloodthirsty speech ... telling us to kill as many Germans as possible and show no mercy."[89]

In general, most conscripts appeared to have viewed their stay in the base camps quite favourably: "grub good, & fags duty free! Haven't quite got into relation between French & English money."[90] Despite the strict schedule,[91] the conscripts had been in the army long enough to be familiar with the overall appearance and regime of a training camp. Thus problems of adjustment stemmed from their presence in a foreign country, surrounded by unknown faces within the camp. Indeed, within a period of weeks the conscripts experienced three complete changes of landscape, both human and physical: from the training camp in England to the troop train and ship, thence to the base camp and finally to the departing draft. A fourth change would be experienced upon their arrival at the front line unit to which they were despatched. Since this was to be a recurring problem throughout the conscript's army career in France, their experiences in the base camps were a suitable form of introduction. One conscript summed up the situation aptly as "very strange, but expect we shall get used to it."[92] This young conscript did indeed stay in Harfleur for two weeks, and thus became more acclimatized. Yet many conscripts moved up the line within days of their arrival. Their

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[89] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 4.10.1916.

[90] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 15.8.1917. For a discussion of these conscripts' payment and money in France see below chapter 8, "The Institution and War."

[91] "Lights out" was at 9 pm in both camps, and passes for the neighbouring towns were restricted to those men who were in residence for longer than eight days, due to quarantine regulations. (Jolley, op. cit. p.7.)

[92] E A Pinks, op. cit. letter of 11.6.1917.

acceptance of the transitory nature of these camps may show that for them normality had already become a relative notion, within which the known existed alongside the unexpected.

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The journey from the base camps to the front line combined the two major systems of British troop movement in France[93]: marching and French troop trains. The conscripts' preceding training experiences of marching, either en-route or to a train station, alongside the protracted periods of enclosure in British trains and ships served as a form of preparation for endurance and discomfort. Yet the initial contact with the French trains still invoked some surprise:

> Long before this we had learned that the soldier must not expect luxuries and on this journey we were not permitted to travel in first class carriages, but found our accommodation in cattle trucks, there being 30 men in each truck.[94]

This conscript's overall account is not imbued with irony, yet it is interesting to note that the introduction to cattle trains moved a number of men to similar turns of ironic phrase: "first class carriages not supplied, satisfied with cattle trucks..."[95]

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[93] Motor lorries are the only other mode of troop transportation mentioned, if sparsely, in the writings examined here. Thus one conscript recalled that "this mode of conveyance was new to us, and the surprising thing about it was the great quantity of dust and dirt that flew up from the wheels and into the backs of the lorries." (Holdsworth, op. cit. p.67.) Another man claimed that there "are many more comfortable methods of travelling than by motor lorrie (sic) especially when on bad roads as these were ... The vans seem to suck in the dust off the roads & by the time we finished our journey we were like millers." (Jolley, op. cit. p.19.)

[94] Adams, op. cit. p.2.

[95] Clark, op. cit. diary entry for 15.8.1916. The three dots appear as such in the original diary.

The cattle trucks had the words "40 Hommes 8 Cheveaux"[96] inscribed upon them, a fact which was remarked upon by most conscripts. Upon seeing this inscription for the first time one of them later wrote that "we thought [this] was an estimate of how we were regarded by the staff (mostly old cavalry men although it was an infantry war) ... We thought one man with common sense was worth fifty horses."[97] Once the men were in the wagons,

> we settled ourselves as best we could on the bare wooden floor, those knowing ones who ranged themselves around the sides were able to lean back & were the best off while those in the middle had to lean against each other.[98]

Since the journeys were both very slow and extended, the discomfort was immense, even if less men were accommodated in each truck. One conscript claims there were thirty six men in his, yet it "was a tight-enough fit that we were to endure for the next forty-eight hours."[99] Another recalled there being "no adequate ventilation; the truck had not been thoroughly cleaned since it had last been occupied; a faint sickening smell was mixed with the heavy air discharged from the lungs of thirty sleeping men."[100] One man spent most of his journey sitting in the open doorway of the truck "with feet dangling out ... 41 men & equipment in one truck ... Realizing what endurance means. Gee whiz feel about done up."[101] It must be noted that in the late twentieth century it is somewhat difficult to comprehend this latter comment as an extreme remonstration against human beings being conveyed in cattle trucks. As Denis Winter put it: "To a generation with visual memories of the railway lines running

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[96] Men and horses did not travel together in the same truck; one soldier was posted on guard duty in each truck of horses.

[97] Hall, op. cit. p.4.

[98] Jolley, op. cit. p.10.

[99] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.7.

[100] Henderson, op. cit. p.23.

[101] W Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 19.8.1917.

into Hitler's death camps, tense faces peering from cattle trucks, there is something disconcerting about the imagery of this journey from base camp."[102]

The trains themselves proceeded with "plenty of creaks, groans and shrieks -- bumping & clattering,"[103] which usually led to "frequent stops for no apparent reason."[104] In all, these trains were "slow but not sure, rickety and decidedly not comfortable; in other words beyond description; ... a veritable picture or pattern of steam-snails."[105] Indeed, "some idea will be given of the speed at which we went when I say that the distance [between Boulogne and Etaples] is less than 20 miles and the time taken was 3 hours."[106] This comment, on the slow pace at which the trains moved, is found in most of the writings examined here: "Train still very slow,"[107] "progress was always slow,"[108] "had a 27 hour journey, could have walked quicker."[109] Indeed, one conscript noted that

> At intervals some of the boys get down from the train and run by the side as the rate we are travelling allows of this being done with ease.[110]

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[102] Death's Men, op. cit. p.74.

[103] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 21.8.1918.

[104] Abraham, op. cit. p.13.

[105] Gale E O, IWM P 331, letter of 28.7.1916.

[106] Bradbury, op. cit. p.5.

[107] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 5.10.1916.

[108] Abraham, op. cit. p.13.

[109] Clark A G, IWM 84/1/1, diary entry for 16.8.1916.

[110] Harris C P, IWM 87/33/1, diary entry for 17.12.1916.

This slow, halting progression was remarkable to the conscripts for two main reasons. Firstly, the cramped conditions in which they travelled became even less endurable with the passing hours. Moreover, there "was no heating apparatus of any description but we found a brazier and some wood and cinders and made a fire but it was nevertheless very cold."[111] The trains were also not equipped with any facilities:

> Whenever we came to a halt men would jump down from the train and scramble up or down the embankments or snake for bushes behind which to relieve themselves. Without any warning the train would start to move and heads would pop up from bushes or long grass and men hurriedly pulling up trousers, would come scrambling back into the train.[112]

These frequent stops were also used for the making of tea with hot water obtained from the waste pipe of the engine's boiler. When the train suddenly began to move men dashed back to their trucks "with the consequence that the best part of the water was spilled, sometimes over the men inside the truck."[113]

Secondly, the conscripts found the French railway system itself a "culture shock". Whatever their social background, all conscripts were acquainted with the British railway system as a model upon which to base their expectations. The normative standards of operation to which they were used, including the quality and speed of the trains, were obviously higher than those offered by the railway system in France. Thus Lt. Allfree claimed that the French trains were "one of the slowest things imaginable,"[114] and another recalled arriving "at some little

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[111] Bradbury, op. cit. p.54.

[112] Abraham, op. cit. p.13.

[113] Jolley, op. cit. p.11.

[114] Allfree, op. cit. p.65.

tin pot station somewhere about Nieuport."[115] One conscript summed up his entire journey comparatively: "The French trains are very different to our English ones and appear to travel at the rate of 1 mile per hour."[116] It is interesting to note that whereas the discomfort of overcrowding was remarked upon with irony, it appears to fit into an overall military existence to which the conscripts were becoming accustomed. But since railways were a normative feature of British life, the relative deficiencies of the French system caused the conscripts some conceptual disorientation, whilst also offering them an objective factor to blame for their uncomfortable journey. In other words, it was the French railway system, rather than the situation or the military organization, that was to blame for the extended hours of discomfort.[117]

The lot of the volunteer soldier was identical to that of the conscript in this case. Cattle trucks for the transportation of troops were used from the start of the war as a functional solution to the problem of mass movement. This is borne out by the fact that there are occasional references to men travelling in regular train carriages[118], and even first class coaches[119]. The slow progress of the trains was also in evidence throughout the war. Robert Graves

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[115] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 19.8.1917.

[116] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.2.

[117] For an extended discussion of these conscript's perceptions of the military organization, see below chapter 9, "Identity and War."

[118] Once again these are compared unfavourably to British trains: "[The third class carriages were] narrower than ever I had seen ... and with hard wooden seats. Seven of us squeezed into one compartment with all our equipment and when once we had fitted our knees into each other it seemed as if we were immovably fixed for the night." (Henderson, op. cit. p.18.)

[119] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.2; Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 5.10.1916.

claimed that the train journey from Harfleur to Bethune, a railhead very close to the front line which should have been "a short journey", took 24 hours in the summer of 1915.[120] At the same time he also noted that the train was composed of forty seven coaches, even though he made no reference to the majority of them being cattle trucks in which the men he commanded sat. Thus the most striking comparison to the journey experienced by the conscript soldier was to that of the officer, who "had much less cramped and more comfortable accommodation in orthodox carriages, albeit with hard wooden seats."[121] Lt. Allfree, who arrived in France as such, travelled up the line in a first class carriage. In addition, he made reference to the use of cars and motor cycles[122] which were at his disposal once he was in the line. Thus, as an officer, his freedom of movement was enhanced not only by his rank but also, and as a result of it, by the modes of transportation open to him.

The journey to the front line, or movement between different sections of the line itself, often lasted two days, and culminated in a long march from the final station at which the troops were deposited. To an extent, marching was a thread of consistency that ran throughout the conscripts' military experiences. From the outset they were marched to the train station that took them to the training camp:

> I will not dwell on the march to the station, the uncomfortable underclothes, the overcoat, the kit bag, the tight breeches and puttees, the heavy boots all made me feel that I was doing purgatory for past sins I had never committed.[123]

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[120] Goodbye to All That, op. cit. p.81.

[121] Taylor, op. cit. p.49.

[122] Allfree, op. cit. pp. 71-2, p.87. passim.

[123] Creek, op. cit. p. 25.

Many miles were marched away on the parade ground, and henceforth, under all circumstances and at all times as soldiers the men proceeded in formation. Thus marching became the bane of their existence, since it was an integral part of practically every activity in the military schedule, regardless of time, place, weather or fatigue.

Marching was basically a form of orderly mass movement over distances of any length, alongside whatever other means of mechanised transportation could be used to convey troops. In England the conscripts were taken on route marches with a full pack on their backs as a preparation for the extended mileage they would cover in France. Once they had crossed the Channel this form of training continued at the base camps, since the men were "marched to the spot [the training ground] in 'full pack' every day, a distance of between 3 and 4 miles."[124] Another conscript recorded a "march of about 8 miles with full pack under a blazing sun; just about done."[125] Indeed, the physical exertion of marching was heightened by the "additional kit which we have received here [at Etaples, that] has made a considerable difference in the weight of our packs which now hang heavy."[126] Like conscription itself, marching was a great equalizer since all troops were subject to it, yet "the artilleryman suffered when he had to march with full kit and rifle, his kit was not packed as conveniently as an infantryman, and his rifle was carried on the gun limber or ammunition wagon, as was his overcoat and spare blanket."[127]

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[124] Lawton J T, IWM 86/48/1, p.7.

[125] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 21.8.1917.

[126] Harris, op cit. diary entry for 20.12.1916.

[127] Creek, op. cit. p.37.

It is difficult to establish the exact weight of an average pack, but it was never less than 60 pounds once the soldier had added the minimum of personal accessories, such as a muffler, a sweater or a notebook.[128] One conscript gunner recalled marching out of the line in October 1916 with a pack weighing over 100 pounds. By night "we felt that either we must drop our loads or else collapse ourselves; choosing the former course we deposited the joints amid the debris on the roadside, going thereby a little short of rations the next day."[129] Another unit of gunners chose a different option in their long march into the trenches:

> A lot of the fellows at the first opportunity dumped their ammunition which was the heaviest part of our kit & which as we had no rifles was no earthly use to us but which we were supposed always to have on us; each pocket of our bandolier held 2 clips of cartridges & in order that the loss should not be noticed the plan adopted was to keep the top pocket full & the remaining ones stuffed with paper.[130]

The roads themselves, or lack thereof, were often another major hindrance to the marching men. The first march in France, from the dock to a base camp, usually alerted men to this difficulty: "We here have our first experience of the cobbled paved roads for marching. It is not a happy one."[131] Marching under a hot sun in summer was very difficult, but in winter the situation was much worse. When it rained, "the mud was simply awful. Got on the road but it wasn't much better than the fields as it was easily 6 inches deep in mud in places and

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[128] The basic weight of a pack was 55 lb 2.5 oz. It comprised: clothing, 11 lb 14.75 oz; rifle 10 lb 11.25 oz; 100 rounds of ammunition 6 lb 4 oz; trench tools 2 lb 9.25 oz; webbing 8 lb 4.75 oz; pack 9 lb 12.25 oz; rations/water 5 lb 10 oz. (Source: D. Winter, op. cit. pp.77-8.)

[129] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.20.

[130] Jolley, op. cit. pp. 11-2.

[131] Harris, op. cit. diary entry for 20.12.1916.

got right over our boot tops."[132] At other times conditions were even worse with roads "ankle deep in snow & mud."[133] In turn, this could often lead to ice upon the road and strong winds cutting across the way.[134]

Any protracted march under these conditions of heavy packs, unremitting weather and bad roads would have been exceedingly difficult; yet the circumstance of war made the situation far worse. One conscript wrote of "the all-night march that followed our relief [which] almost exhausted us. The captain lost his way, and we kept scrambling through prickly hedges, going hither and thither, crossing and recrossing the same line of railway in efforts to locate our position ... the difficulty of night movement can be imagined."[135] Marches were usually punctuated by short stops for rest and drinking, yet water supply was often a problem. One conscript claimed "men [were] crying for water" after "a terrible night march."[136] Another described an "extra long march and stopped in a place miles from anywhere and about 2 miles to go for water. It poured with rain, we were wet to the skin. Never so fed up in my life."[137]

The physical discomfort at these times was immense, especially since many men suffered minor ailments which were intensified by the continuous movement. One young conscript

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[132] Bass, op. cit. diary entry for 8.10.1916.

[133] Dixon G H, IWM 86/57/1, diary entry for 8.1.1917.

[134] Adams, op. cit. p.7.

[135] R D Fisher, op. cit. pp.16-7.

[136] Hughes, op. cit. diary entry for 6.7.1916.

[137] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 26.8.1917.

recalled the pain of marching an entire night with his pack pressing upon a boil on his back. On arrival at the camp it had grown to such dimensions that he was excused seven days duty.[138] But the most common afflictions were those caused by ill-fitting boots. Thus on a sudden retreat in October 1917:

> We went with full pack and equipment, blankets etc. ... my feet got slightly blistered, with small boots and chafing of dirt, but carried on ... with 'skeleton marching order' & could not go any father (sic) so fell out, so did Jack Moore & Taffy Jones to look after me, caught a lorry to the 5 crossroads at Bethune, from there Taffy carried me two thirds of the way to the hospital, & dumped me in the bath house, had a bath & was detained in hospital.[139]

The most difficult marches were those for men coming out of the trenches, after a period in the front line: "I have conceived the utmost respect for the infantry since I came out here. It's really one of the few stirring sights of the war to witness a remnant battalion of silent tommies plodding back laden like Atlas."[140] In some cases men fainted on these extended marches, or simply dropped by the wayside until their strength returned to them. The descriptions of the massive Spring Retreat of 1918 are most touching in this context, simply because everyone had to go on, all support systems having been destroyed, and "everyone having seeming lost their direction"[141]:

> Barely room to march on the roads, since so many retreating, marched all day, part of the night ... Soon we found ourselves surrounded by green fields ... but we could not feel happy with feet in their present condition, and both officers and men were equally afflicted. The captain shared his horse with other officers, and stronger men carried weaker men's rifles; so we crawled along.[142]

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[138] Adams, op. cit. p.8.

[139] Preston, op. cit. diary entry for 18.10.1917.

[140] Blore E, IWM 86/36/1, letter of 10.1.1917.

[141] Bradbury, op. cit. p.62.

[142] R D Fisher, op. cit. diary entries for 27-8.3.1918.

But in some units there were no stronger men:

> ... we passed a Labour Battalion composed mostly of old men. They were being made to march as fast as possible in order not to be captured and every man carried big heavy kit bags in addition to heavy bundles of blankets, also their picks or shovels. To see these old men struggling along under their heavy burdens with sweat pouring from them as they trudged along was a sight enough to bring tears into a man's eyes.[143]

And yet the march always went on, often for days and miles at a time. Thus a march between sectors: "The first day's march was a short one only doing just under 5 kilometeres, and off again next day, this time doing 16 kilometers ... the next day we done (sic) 15 kilometeres ... [next day] another 16 kilometeres ... then off to Habareq 16 kilometers, thus arriving at our new sector, ARRAS."[144] The army's expectations of mileage per day may be estimated by the following comment: "... they treated us very gently, allowing three days to cover a distance of thirty-three miles."[145] One young conscript, a category B man who was sent out to France in the final months of the war, wrote to his parents of frequent marches. In one letter he described a 10 mile march, which he claimed the "fellows stood splendidly ... If we go on like this we shall all be losing our categories and be A.1."[146]

The comparison to the volunteer or regular soldier is pointless here also, since all troops marched their way through France. They were sometimes joined by low ranking officers,

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[143] Bradbury, op. cit. p.61.

[144] Clark, op. cit. p.7.

[145] R D Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 8.4.1918.

[146] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 5.7.1918.

albeit without the weight of a pack on their backs; but the high ranking officers were far removed from the men and the march:

> Once a glittering batch of generals passed us all dressed up ... They flashed past like a savage's idea of god -- all angry and omnipotent and expensive -- and a cloud of dust.[147]

Under calm circumstances marching sometimes offered the men some mental respite. One conscript, whose unit was in a rest camp after an extended tour of duty in the trenches, noted "a nice long route march."[148] Another wrote home of a three day march in which he "enjoyed the country and villages very much."[149] Yet overall, marching remained the bane of the conscripts' life. As one of them summed it up in a letter: cattle trucks on troop trains were awful, "but still, it was better than marching."[150]

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Upon reaching the front line, or a camp close to it, for the first time, these conscripts had effectively completed their transformation into combat soldiers. This process had been initiated, unbeknown to them, by their names appearing on a local register as liable for

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[147] Blore, op. cit. letter of 29.1.1917.

[148] Preston, op. cit. diary entry for 26.7.1917. Within the overall context of this man's writings, the remark was not meant in irony.

[149] Abrey A E, IWM 84/41/1, letter of 28.3.1917.

[150] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 21.8.1918.

conscription. The subsequent notification of the local military authorities had led to a "call-up" notice being sent to each man, and his eventual enlistment. The bureaucratic transition was completed after an individual had filled in an attestation form and been allotted a regimental number. The physical transition was completed once training in England, and later France, was at an end. The geographical transition removed the man from his home to a training camp, then to France, and ultimately to the front line -- his sole habitat, for the most part, until the end of his military career. All of these wrought the external transformation of a civilian into a soldier. Mentally, it is clear that most men had adjusted to their new status by the time they reached the front line. This, however, does not signify a transformation in their consciousness, from that of civilians to that of soldiers. Conscripts arriving at the front for the first time viewed their surroundings through the eyes of the uninitiated civilian soldier, and not as military men:

> He tried to imagine ... [his first] attack, but after the snippets of conversation he had picked up he knew that all his notions were far from reality. If these men were to be believed, hand-to-hand encounters were rare. You didn't run or charge across No man's Land, but simply walked. Also, you saved your breath and went silently. No attempt made to intimidate the enemy with blood-curdling yells as at Witely Camp; you offered yourself as a target. If you came out all right, you grinned, and agreed that Old Fritz had put up a good show. If you got a Blighty wound -- 'tres bon!'[151]

It now remains to be seen whether their months and years at the front, mostly isolated from civilian contact, would cause a transformation in these conscripts' consciousness, bestowing upon them the military identity of soldiers.

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[151] Tilsley, op. cit. p.10.

B. Actualities of War

"If I had time ... to study war,
I think I should concentrate almost entirely on the
'actualities of war' -- the effects of tiredness, hunger,
fear, lack of sleep, weather ... it is the actualities
that make war so complicated and so difficult,
and are usually so neglected by historians."

(Field-Marshal Lord Wavell to Basil Liddell Hart)

Chapter Seven: Mud and War

... my father used
to become hoarse talking about how it was
a privilege and if only he
could meanwhile my

self etcetera lay quietly
in the deep mud et

cetera...

(e. e. cummings, "my sweet old etcetera")

Weather:

Mud is an indispensable component of the imagery of the Great War, presenting a tableau in which brave soldiers were aligned in trenches against the enemy, splattered by the mud and sludge that surrounds them on all sides. An image that combined a figurative and literal entrenchment. And indeed, it was probably one of the very few mythologized images that was rooted in fact. This public cognizance was drawn from the well known writings upon which most of the collective images of the war are based -- the poems and books of Graves, Owen and Sassoon for example -- that are infused with references to climatic conditions of all kinds, but most especially of mud. Thus for example the opening lines of Owen's "Dulce Et Decorum Est":

> Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
> Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
> Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
> And towards our distant rest began to trudge.

Officers and other ranks, volunteers and conscripts -- any human being who graced the trenches of Flanders for the shortest time, wrote of the weather. This is not surprising, since Flanders and Picardy "are most affected by the changeable weather brought in by the Atlantic disturbances."[1] Despite being located within a West-Maritime climate, which is characterized by a cool winter and a warm summer, the ocean currents mean that "rain occurs at all times of the year."[2] The annual rainfall in this area, which climatically averages between 25 to 50 inches a year,[3] therefore approaches the higher rather than the lower figure. Digging trenches in Flanders and Picardy was thus "not the least of the ironies of the war for the British,"[4] since the ground was constantly damp and shifting, and any impression in the earth filled with water at a remarkable speed. Moreover, the ice and snow which is typical of the area in the winter months, and inhibiting in itself, quickly turned to water under heavy shelling. Mud and water, therefore, really were the prevalent image of the trenches.

The writings of the conscripts discussed here contain over one hundred and fifty references[5] to the rain, wind, snow and sun which produced ice, mud, sludge and dust. Any attempt to do justice to the length and detail of these notes, as a complete reflection of the importance of these climatic conditions within their existence, would therefore run to many pages. It would, however, contribute little, due to the repetitive nature of many entries, and their

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[1] E.A. Pearce & C.G. Smith, The World Weather Guide, (Hutchinson, 1990), p.353.

[2] ibid. p.354.

[3] The Citizen's Atlas of the World, (John Bartholomew & Son Ltd, Edinburgh, Ninth Edition).

[4] Fussell, op. cit. p.47.

[5] A reference here is at least one full sentence of contextual description.

aforementioned similarity to the generally accepted account of the war. Therefore this section will deal only with those aspects of the weather which are salient to these conscripts' perception of their military experiences.

References to weather could be roughly divided between objective descriptive statements, such as "Weather very hot,"[6] or "next day was very snowy;"[7] and narratives in which it played an integral part: "Lay down in six inches of mud & ice during a snowstorm for about two hours. Go back by the road and dig in at the side[;] wet through and feet frozen, can't get boots off to dry socks."[8] Whilst the former category points to the importance of the weather within these conscripts consciousness, the latter highlights its effect upon their experiences. In turn, this leads to a further division between the conscripts as human beings and as soldiers. As humans their primary concern was existential: "The weather out here has been very cold I can hardly keep myself warm."[9] However, as soldiers, the climatic conditions also had a functional aspect:

> Them guns [9.2 Howitzers] were 23 ton when they were fully put together and firing... They would bring the guns in at night and you had to keep out of sight. Oh christ it was a job. And, of course, it was all done in water -- shell-holes and water.[10]

Thus the elements were both an integral part of these conscripts' existence, and an additional component of their military experiences with which they often had to do battle whilst fighting the enemy.

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[6] Bishop op. cit. diary entry for 12.7.1917.

[7] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.6.

[8] Dixon, op. cit. p.3.

[9] Abrey, op. cit. letter of 7.10.1918.

[10] Rudge, op. cit. p.7.

Beyond these conceptual divisions, most references to the weather revolved around the awful mud within and around the trenches, which was apparent at all times of the year. It was basically a fixture within the landscape encountered by these conscripts. In October 1916 one of them claimed "everything is one slimy mass of mud."[11] By August 1917 the "mud was appalling, and the ground was pitted all over with shell holes ... and all the holes were half full of water."[12] And in October 1918, Flanders was "a miserable place -- undulating country -- pitted with shell-holes full of water -- & shell shattered trees everywhere. The mud is -- well -- best left unmentioned."[13]

Given that many Englishmen were used to rain and snow, the circumstances in Flanders obviously surpassed any normative concept of mud. Thus before considering its effects, many of these conscripts were moved to comment simply upon its existence, which was clearly unique to the English eye: "oh! the mud! You people in England have not seen mud!"[14] Diary entries also reflected this unknown quantity: "Arrived at about the muddiest place I have ever seen,"[15] or "Mud something chronic."[16] Thus the "prevalent discomfort ... is the mud which clings like poor relations and breeds twice as fast. It's burlesque simply. The roads are a swirling batter of filth which splashes the tree tops and the moon."[17]

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[11] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 19.10.1916.

[12] Allfree, op. cit. p.171.

[13] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 17.10.1918.

[14] Evans C R T, IWM 87/45/1, letter of 12.12.1916.

[15] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 4.11.1916.

[16] Hughes, op. cit. diary entry for 4.7.1916.

[17] Blore, op. cit. letter of 10.1.1917.

It is interesting to note that discussions of the weather caused many of these men to frame their descriptions in nearly identical terms. Hence when referring to the watery consistency of the mud, one conscript claimed to be "stuck in the sea of mud,"[18] whilst another noted that "everything a sea of mud."[19] These conditions were constantly worsened since "it rained without ceasing the whole day,"[20] or "Rained fast every bit of the day."[21] As a result, conscripts found "mud and water knee deep,"[22] or "trenches knee deep in places."[23] These examples, of which there are many, point to the uniformity of the conditions and the impact they had upon these conscripts. A typical summary of this situation is therefore that "it rained the whole time we were in the front line and when we came out you could hardly see us for mud, it was simply caked on us."[24]

Mud appeared to permeate every aspect of these men's existence, leaving them no safe or dry corner of refuge:

> [It] made our dugouts almost intenable (sic), for we entered them through openings only two feet high. When crawling into them on hands and knees over the threshold of wet mud, our overcoats soon became so thickly coated that some of us cut wide strips from the bottom, to lighten the load, roughly hemming round the new edge at our later leisure.[25]

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[18] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.26.

[19] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 1.8.1917.

[20] Allfree, op. cit. p.165.

[21] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 1.8.1917.

[22] Adams, op. cit. p.6.

[23] Hughes, op. cit. diary entry for 29.8.1916.

[24] Fraser J, IWM 86/19/1, letter of 1.10.1916.

[25] R D Fisher, op. cit. pp. 24-5.

Even in camps behind the lines simple existential tasks, such as eating, became a struggle:

> The rain has made this camp very muddy & it is very difficult to get about the mud being well over the ankles & very slippery & sticky. Our cook house was pitched in a very awkward position being in a sunken road & after drawing our rations if we wished to have our meals in our "bivvy" we had to climb up the steep sides of the road bank & then wade through the mud past the mule lines before we reached our hut. This was a very difficult job when one was carrying a mess tin full of tea in one hand & a chunk of bread & jam in the other & many a meal went "west" in the struggle without any chance of getting another.[26]

The basic problem of living "up to our eyes in mud,"[27] was that it "made movement very slow & difficult."[28] Thus it "was an exceedingly trying business to extricate ones feet at each step and the progress likewise slow. We were all wearing gum boots which reached to our knees, otherwise it would have been impossible to walk."[29] Some situations were indeed impossible, as in the case of a conscript who got stuck in the morass and thus found himself exposed to the Germans for several hours.[30] One man claimed it took nearly six hours for stretcher bearers to bring in a wounded man from the mud of No-Man's-Land,[31] whilst another wrote of a blizzard which lasted for two and half days in April 1917, during which his dug-out "became a quagmire. Several men buried in the wet clay."[32] Sometimes it was

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[26] Jolley, op. cit. p.20.

[27] White D N, IWM CON SHELF, letter of 4.10.1916.

[28] Hall, op. cit. p.8.

[29] Holdsworth, op. cit. pp. 6-7.

[30] Adams, op. cit. p.10.

[31] Allfree, op. cit. p.160.

[32] Dixon, op. cit. p.2.

possible to help a man who was stuck, by forming a human "chain to the nearest firm bit of ground and haul[ing] him out, leaving the trench boots behind."[33]

Horses were also much afflicted by the mud, and if one became embedded it was a measure of how severe the situation was:

> To give some idea of the mud, I need only mention that I saw a horse, harnessed to a French wagon, with its hind legs so deeply sunk in the mud, that it could not move. Its hind legs were buried right up to its haunches, so that its stomach was level with, and lying on the ground, with its front legs stretched straight out in front of it along the ground. It had to be dug out.[34]

Other horses were not so fortunate. One conscript recalled "taking two horses down to the village trough to water, [when] two of another battery's horses became stuck and could not move, fell down and had to be shot."[35] Even if they did not get stuck, the daily round of care for horses was exceedingly difficult under such circumstances. One conscript noted in his diary that "the captain sent us out to take the blasted horses for a walk in the rain and the mud."[36] Another man elaborated on this task further:

> Watering is some job now as our way lies across a plain & the water lays here like a pond so that if you lead your mules you get splashed from head to foot & soaked, while if you ride, their backs are soaking wet & you get wet that way.
>
> Still riding is best, but when you get to the troughs it is simply awful, you are almost up to your knees in mud as you are forced to dismount it being against orders to sit on a mules back while they are watering. Then the job of mounting again is very difficult seeing you are stuck in the mud & woe betide you if an officer should see you put your foot on the trough. So it often happened that the officer would give the

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[33] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.26.

[34] Allfree, op. cit. p.155.

[35] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.6.

[36] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 1.8.1917.

> order to move off before you were up & then you have to wade through the mud & get soaked through.[37]

The mud resulted from constant downpours of rain, which also caused periodic floods. Hence being soaked was also a fixture of these conscripts' lives. There are many diary entries such as "It poured with rain, we were wet to the skin."[38] The rain was also a favourite topic in letters, since it was a matter which could easily be conveyed to a civilian audience:

> We are getting very wet weather now, yesterday we had thunder and lightening and the rain simply came down in torrents, we all got soaked through and its a bit rotten when you can't get your clothes dried and have to put them on wet. It is pouring rain again today so we get another ducking ... the rain is coming through [the tent] and that accounts for the blots.[39]

Other men who lived in tents were actually "flooded out"[40], an option familiar to those who were without any artificial shelter: "Raining hard. No sleeping place, crept in a hole and had a rough night. Rain coming through."[41] But even those who managed to find shelter in more substantial accommodation were not immune from water. Thus a conscript who was in a concrete dug-out wrote home that it was "fairly comfortable ... [but] during the night the river Steenbeek (which runs close by) rises and floods us out and we have some difficulty in saving our kits."[42] Sometimes respite was found with a "pump to pump water away ... [since] trenches something awful;"[43] but overall, there was very little that could be done in

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[37] Jolley, op. cit. p.22.

[38] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 26.8.1917.

[39] Fraser, op. cit. letter of 30.8.1916.

[40] White, op. cit. letter of 8.11.1916

[41] Carey F, IWM 85/43/1, diary entry for 31.7.1917.

[42] Harris, op. cit. letter of 15.1.1918.

[43] Hughes, op. cit. diary entry for 30.8.1916.

the face of these torrents. As one conscript put it: "Storm & flood. My word when it rains in France it comes down in buckets full & continues for hours. Suppose it is the firing [that] does it."[44]

The permanent presence of rain and mud were the background against which the seasons of the year presented themselves to these men. Both as Englishmen who were used to a gentle summer, and as soldiers clothed in heavy uniform, days of extreme heat were very uncomfortable: "It has been hotter than ever to-day, & as you can imagine we feel the heat very much indeed, it is really too hot to be comfortable, especially in this life."[45] As a result of this climate, "we drip & drip, & sweat & sweat, till we fairly run away in streams of grease."[46] A number of men refered to excessive sweating under "sweltering heat,"[47] in which "flies are an awful nuisance, swarming about on everything."[48] In addition, the normal round of military and fighting duties had to be fulfilled, "& all the while under a broiling hot sun."[49] But warm weather also had its positive aspects. Frederick Voigt, who was a category B man who worked behind the lines claimed that

> for several months we had been working in a wood-yard and saw-mills. Our lives had become unspeakably monotonous, but the coming of warm days banished much of our dreariness.[50]

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[44] Jolley, op. cit. p.22.

[45] E A Pinks, op. cit. letter of 15.6.1917.

[46] Gale, op. cit. letter of 28.7.1916.

[47] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 21.8.1918.

[48] Fraser, op. cit. letter of 12.9.1916.

[49] Jolley, op. cit. p.30.

[50] Voigt, op. cit. (1920 edition), p.110.

Sunbathing was also possible between duties behind the lines;[51] and, in addition, "As it was so warm most of us kipped in the field instead of billet."[52]

The option of sleeping out in the open air or under tents became far less pleasant during the colder periods, which were much longer than the warm ones. Strong winds and ice were common throughout the long months of winter, which were "longer than city men could grasp and all nights colder just before the dawn than they would ever have guessed, judging by the physical distance from the south of England. During the winter of 1917, when there was one degree of frost in London, there were fifteen in Arras."[53] In fact, this assessment was one degree out, according to a letter written in January 1917:

> The winter is combining with the normal discomforts of war to some effect: This morning 16 degrees of frost were discovered by the authorities who take the trouble to issue the results of such research on pink paper each day. Anyway I awoke to find my sponge anchored like a coral reef while my outer blanket simply flew up like a sheet of roofing when I mobilised for ablutions.[54]

Whether fifteen or sixteen degrees, the frosts of January 1917 were clearly extreme, since they are noted in many of the writings examined here. One conscript wrote of digging "new trenches at night for many weeks but sometimes the ground was so frozen that we could not make any progress."[55] Another man recalled it being "Terribly cold weather. Coldest winter ever known in France."[56] A diligent diarist kept a record of the weather, noting on January

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[51] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 13.3.1917, and passim.

[52] ibid, diary entry for 10.5.1917, and passim.

[53] D. Winter, Death's Men, op. cit. p.95.

[54] Blore, op. cit. letter of 29.1.1917.

[55] IWM Misc 95/Item 1457.

[56] Dixon, op. cit. p.2.

21, 1917 "frost since 14th Jan," and "Still freezing hard" on the 29th.[57] The prevailing conditions of this month, and these conscripts' attitude to them, were best expressed as "a sort of firm snow falling all the time. It is no use looking forward to any fine weather for this next three months... getting too cold to write and Bed (sic) is the best place."[58]

Other periods were also harsh. Late in 1916 a conscript noted "snow again,"[59] whilst a man newly arrived in France wrote to his wife: "Yes dear I should love some wool gloves, we get some severe frosts now, they would be better than mittens I think for our job dear."[60] In April 1917 there was "hail, rain and snow,"[61] and in October of that year the "weather [was] very bad."[62] One conscript recalled a particularly heavy snow in January 1918, in which "our already soaked overcoats had frozen stiff; the lowest parts like boards, only that portion near our body remaining pliable, but when removed, this instantly froze hard also, and could not be put on again."[63] Strong winds were also a severe handicap. In mid winter they hardened the snow on the roads, and thus marching in and out of the trenches became extremely perilous. Men often slipped onto their backs "and cursed the leading officer who was in such a hurry on his horse that we barely had time to regain our balance."[64]

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[57] Grant L F, IWM 87/13/1.

[58] IWM Misc 263, letter of 11.1.1917.

[59] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 19.12.1916.

[60] White, op. cit. letter of 21.10.1916.

[61] Bishop, op. cit. diary entry for 13.4.1917.

[62] ibid, diary entry for 19.10.1917.

[63] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.44.

[64] ibid, p.42.

Yet even without the problem of icy roads, the combination of rain and wind inhibited progress: "To exercise this a.m. with wind nearly enough to blow a horse over and raining till I could hardly see where I was. Wind and rain all day; nearly frozen in stables."[65] This latter comment highlighted the severe problem of cold, as a theme which ran through many letters and diaries, clearly because it was so crucial to these men's existence. Thus one conscript recalled spending several hours each day jumping up and down upon the duckboards in the trenches, in order to warm up. Another wrote that he felt so "cold I can scarcely hold this pencil that I am writing with, I wish I could have a little warm at the stove in the office it would be like paradise."[66] As a parallel theme, these men also depicted a constant battle for warmth. "Scrounging around for wood,"[67] chopping it, lighting a fire and sitting around it whenever possible, were activities that were undertaken between military duties. Yet often the battle for heat was diminished by the circumstances of trench existence: A flooded trench meant "we were sitting around the fire with our feet in water."[68] In another case a brazier was kept ablaze in a front bombing position "where we continued to hang a ground sheet so as to obscure all light from it to the enemy. The smoke is rather troublesome until one gets used to it."[69]

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[65] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 20.3.1917.

[66] Fraser, op. cit. letter of 17.10.1916.

[67] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry 19.11.1916, and passim; Bishop, op. cit. diary entry for 28.6.1917 and passim; W L Fisher, diary entry for 8.10.1917.

[68] W L Fisher, op. cit. letter of 8.10.1917.

[69] Harris, op. cit. letter of 21.12.16.

The climatic conditions in themselves were therefore not the real problem which these men faced. Rather, it was the lack of protection from the elements which affected them most, and thus coloured their perceptions. Under such conditions an ailment known as "Trench-foot" quickly became common, often accounting for immense numbers of casualties.[70] Trench-foot was the general term attributed to a variety of symptoms, such as painful swelling or inflammation of the feet, which first became numb and cold and then red and hot. In the worst cases, the inflammation spread to the knees or even the thighs. The ailment resulted from wet feet being encased in wet socks and boots, often for sustained periods. As one of these men wrote home: "My feet are incessantly wet through and "gawd 'ates me"."[71] Another claimed that "my feet have been wet now for three weeks, but it cannot be helped."[72] Whilst a third noted that he had removed neither boots nor puttees for five consecutive days.[73] Thus the problem was twofold: the rains produced a consistently wet environment, in which the trenches were permanently wet and often also flooded out. Whereas the nature of trench warfare often dictated lengthy periods of activity in which men could not remove their boots or dry their feet. To many, the basic problem was one of damp socks rather than wet boots. One man recalled that "your socks were rotted and you never had a

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[70] Even if hospitalization was not needed, this ailment debilitated men for a number of days, in which they had to rest their feet in a dry place -- such as the reserve line. Men who had been afflicted once by the complaint were far more susceptible than others. Throughout the war 74,711 men, suffering either from trench-foot or frostbite, were admitted to hospitals in France. (J. Brent-Wilson, The Morale and Discipline of the British Expeditionary Force in 1914, (University Of New Brunswick, M.A. Thesis, 1978) p.32.)

[71] Dale Lt J, IWM P 272, letter of 10.8.1917.

[72] White, op. cit. letter of 8.11.1916.

[73] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 11.10.1916, and passim.

change of anything."[74] This latter comment was not strictly true, since other men claimed that "every day we were given a change of socks and made to rub our feet for ten minutes with whale-oil."[75]

> Each day a man came from somewhere at the rear with a sandbags full of dried socks, hand over our wet socks, anoint our feet with the oil and put on two dried socks. Of course we never got pairs, or our own from the previous day, we just got the first two that came out of the bag, one might be a small brown one and the other a large grey one. As they were taken away and dried day after day they became stiffer and smellier and the stench in that dugout became indescribable.[76]

Other men sought solace from home: "Thank you so much for ... [the] eight socks -- all of which have come to make life exceedingly bearable."[77]

This perpetual dampness caused no less problems than those attributed to the constant pressure of shrinking wet boot leather: "The combined cold and damp underfoot brought on many foot troubles at this time, for the water gradually oozed through and soaked our heavy boots; feet turned numb and toes turned funny colours."[78] As a result knee-high gum boots, which were frequently mentioned in these writings and are noted above, became standard issue for men in the trenches. As in the case of socks, the distribution of these boots was also not very organized. Thus one of these conscripts recalled being sent to a section of the front line in which the trenches were flooded, causing many men to complain of afflicted feet.

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[74] Rudge, op. cit. p.8.

[75] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.46.

[76] Abraham, op. cit. pp.57-8.

[77] Blore, op. cit. letter of 29.1.1917.

[78] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.46.

Eventually gum boots were issued, "but, following a common army practice, they took them away after a few hours because someone else wanted them."[79]

The gum boots also often proved to be inadequate, since the watery mud was sometimes higher than the protection they offered. In addition, the boots, were also "not good for the feet."[80] One conscript wrote of a march out of the trenches, which culminated in sitting around a fire in order to "remove our 'gum' boots. With me this is rather a painful business as owing to a tear in the boot the water has got in and caused my foot to become swollen and painful."[81] The affliction was treated and subsided within a week, however this man went back into the trenches three weeks later, and was once again subjected to a bout of wet feet and boots. As a result, he developed a "skin affectation which is causing much irritation,"[82] for which he had to be hospitalized. Hence casualties of the war were also casualties of the weather, due to "the ever prevalent problem out here: 'What to do with your feet.'"[83]

These conscripts' existence literally within mud and rain meant that they were permanently fighting two wars -- with the Germans and with the weather, without it always being clear which enemy was considered worse:

> It wasn't the foe we feared,
> It wasn't the bullets that whined,
> It wasn't the business career

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[79] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.24.

[80] Barraclough, op. cit. p.7.

[81] Harris, op. cit. letter of 3.12.1916.

[82] idem, letter of 21.1.1917.

[83] Blore, op. cit. letter of 29.1.1917.

Of a shell, or the burst of a mine.
It wasn't the sniper who sought
To nip our young hope in the bud.
No It wasn't the guns
And it wasn't the Huns
It was the MUD - MUD - MUD.[84]

The Germans, it appeared, felt themselves to be in an identical situation despite their often superior trenches:

> Owing to heavy rain in the night the trench fell in many places, and the soil mixing with rain to a sticky soup turned the trench into an almost impassable swamp. The only comfort was that the English were no better off, for they could be seen busily scooping the water out of their trench. As we were on higher ground, they had the benefit of the superfluous water we pumped out as well. The collapse of the trench walls brought to light a number of those who fell in the last autumn's fighting.[85]

In summarizing the conscripts' attitude to the weather, it must be noted that most of these men ranked the effects of fighting alongside the weather and their exposure to it, as determining factors within their attitude to their placement. Whilst good weather did not necessarily make them glad to be soldiers, their acceptance of their situation was more positive -- if one were to take lack of complaint as a measure. In addition, the small number of references to good weather, beyond those to exceptionally hot days which caused discomfort, also pointed to the importance of weather within their consciousness only on a negative basis. In other words, good weather reflected little upon these men simply because it did not make their existence substantially more difficult. Bad weather inhibited their functions as humans and as soldiers, and was therefore central to them and their attitude. As

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[84] Ditty entitled "Reminiscences of Rilken Ridge, August 1917," in: Bennet, op. cit.

[85] Ernst Junger, The Storm of Steel, (Chatto & Windus, 1929), p.48.

one conscript put it: "Everlasting guns "popping off" day and night ... rain, mud, wind and general desolation and misery."[86]

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Think of me crouching where the worms creep
Waiting for someone to sing me to sleep
Sing me to sleep in some old barn
Where some old nag has laid his head
Stretched out upon my water proof
Dodging the rain's drops through the roof...[87]

Billets:

Accommodation and billets, of any kind, were a prominent issue in the writings of these conscripts. Since a large portion of the Great War was fought within the confines of trench warfare, it is often assumed that trenches were the only habitat known to its soldiers. And indeed, "dug-outs" in trenches were the major form of accommodation available to soldiers, especially infantrymen, in the front line. Yet even a dug-out was not necessarily a definitive dwelling, rather a title attached to various forms of shelter improvised by men who sought refuge both from the weather and the firing line. Moreover, aside from one man who claimed

[86] Gale, op. cit. letter of 31.10.1917.

[87] "Sing me to Sleep," possibly composed by F.Dixon of B. Company, 19th Middlesex Regt; cited in: Howes, op. cit.

to have spent thirteen consecutive months in one section of the trenches,[88] all these conscripts moved both in and out of the line, and around various sectors of it. Hence whilst marching and resting they resided within permanent and makeshift camps of huts, tents and bivouacs; derelict cottages and bombed cellars; barns, schools and any other structure that could be adapted to the needs of the army. Since the measures of adaptation were minimal, the most salient features of these dwellings were usually filth and lack of substance. Thus in accordance with the functional nature of the war and its developments, accommodation was basically an issue dependant upon availability, necessity and circumstances rather than planning.

The front line was the centre of activity in the war, hence this discussion will commence with these soldiers' perception of the trenches and thence the other abodes which they encountered. The front-line trenches which the conscripts occupied were very different from those known to the earlier soldiers of the war. Trench warfare evolved initially in September 1914, when both sides found themselves unable to break through the enemy line. However, due to the onset of winter, and the lack of sufficient supplies, ammunition and soldiers, what started out as a temporary situation of stagnant opposition developed into two permanent lines of stationary combat.[89] As a result, the hastily dug trenches which marked the early line also had to be improved. Thus in October 1914 a soldier wrote that in his sector the British "trenches, engineer-planned, were good, and clean cut in straight bays and traverses, some of

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[88] Rudge, op. cit. p.8.

[89] For a discussion of the military events leading to the establishment of trench warfare see for example: T. Wilson, op. cit. ch.4, ch.10. On the subject of organizational problems in the supply of men and ammunition at this time, see for example: K. Grieves, op. cit. ch.1; D. French, British Strategy..., op. cit. ch. 8-9. For a full narrative of the events from the combat viewpoint, see for example: J.C. Dunn, op. cit. ch. I-V.

which had been revetted with sandbags."[90] Yet the communication trench, which facilitated the movement of ammunition and rations, the evacuation of wounded men and finally retreat, was not yet completed. Hence despite appearances, the trench was basically unsafe, and required more work upon it. As one captain explained in the spring of 1915: "When I came out here first, all we did in the trenches was to paddle about like ducks and use our rifles. We didn't think of them as places to live in, they were just temporary inconveniences. Now we work here all the time, not only for safety but for health. Night and day. First, at fire steps, then at building traverses, improving the communication trenches, and so on; last comes our personal comfort -- shelters and dug-outs."[91]

By mid 1915 this process of consolidation was at its peak, thus introducing what Denis Winter defined as the institutionalized, middle period of the war.[92] At its height, the front line system was composed of three parallel lines of trenches: "the fire trench, the travel trench at twenty yards, then the support line, close enough to reinforce in case of a raid. All three lines were built in dog-tooth shape with bays five paces wide ... The depth of the trenches was about four feet with a built-up wall of sandbags as a parapet to allow men to stand upright ... At the bottom of a trench ran a drainage runnel leading to sumps and covered with lengths of wooden ladder called duckboards."[93] Even after construction, nightly working

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[90] John F. Lucy, There's a Devil in the Drum, (London, Faber & Faber, 1938), quoted in Wilson, The Myriad Faces of War, op. cit. p.63.

[91] Graves, op. cit. pp. 85-6.

[92] Death's Men, op. cit. pp. 19-20.

[93] ibid. p.80. For a full discussion of the construction of trenches and their function throughout the middle period of the war, 1915 to March 1918, see: Winter, ch.6.

parties laboured at these trenches, replacing safety buttresses and improving their protection. Robert Graves observed such a party at work in a typical trench in 1915:

> [They] were filling sandbags with earth, piling them up bricklayer fashion, the headers and stretchers alternating, then patting them flat with spades. The sentries stood on the fire-step at the corners of the traverses ... Two parties, each of an N.C.O. and two men, were out in the company listening posts, connected with the front trench by a sap about fifty yards long. The German line stretched some three hundred yards beyond. From berths hollowed in the sides of the trench and curtained with sandbags came the grunt of sleeping men.[94]

The German advance of Spring 1918 shattered this system, making "real trench warfare ... almost a thing of the past, and most of the fighting was done in shell-holes and the open country."[95] In this last phase of the war, the trenches were "merely shell-holes joined together. The sides were supported by brushwood to prevent them from collapsing. The huge shell craters were impossible to get out of if one should fall in as they were full of green water. The bridges were composed only of narrow duck-boards which were placed over the craters to make a track to the advanced trenches."[96]

The writings examined here refered mostly to the trench dug-outs in which the men existed and slept between duties. Thus a conscript newly arrived in the front line early in 1917 recorded his first impressions in stark, yet encompassing terms: "Look round. Chaps sleep in dug out which runs for over a mile in clifs (sic).[97] Plenty of rats, Dead bodies and bad smells."[98] Another man "found the dugout leaking and a lot of water inside;"[99] whereas a

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[94] Graves, op. cit. pp. 87-8.

[95] Barraclough, op. cit. p.7.

[96] Copson, op. cit. p.6.

[97] This is a reference to "shelves" hollowed out of the wall of the trench.

[98] Bishop, op. cit. diary entry for 6.3.1917.

third recalled his initial experience in "just an ordinary chalk trench. Its name was Fleet Street. being in the Ficheux sector all trench names commenced with "F". Some dug-outs - some tin shelters in the parapet - duck boards all along."[100] This latter was a description of a common solution to the problem of shelter in the trenches -- an attempt to "make ourselves as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. There is some sort of shelter formed by roofing an angle of the trench with corrugated iron."[101] In some cases the inadequacy of these improvised shelters quickly became apparent. Thus another conscript also wrote of a dugout covered with a "piece of corrugated iron over the trench thus making a path over the trench. To our surprise a pack mule crossed over on this path one night but his weight proved rather too heavy for our simple structure and almost immediately after the animal attempted this route my comrade and myself found ourselves buried alive temporarily but managed to extricate ourselves."[102]

Beyond their structure, these men's perception of the trenches and dug-outs was also coloured by less material factors, such as smells. A typical first impression of the trenches, as noted above, usually referred to "Dead bodies and bad smells."[103] Another conscript noted that many dug-outs were "really saps as they were right under the earth accessible by means of underground passages fitted up with electric light. These saps were rather evil-smelling with

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[99] Acklam, diary entry for 30.10.1916.

[100] Cobb, op. cit. p.7.

[101] Harris, op. cit. letter of 21.12.1916.

[102] Adams, op. cit. p.3.

[103] Bishop, op. cit. diary entry for 6.3.1917.

numerous rats about."[104] This evil trench smell was clearly pervasive and unique, resulting from a landscape dominated by death and rain. Hence "it was unwise to disturb the trench sides in any way because of the awful smell that came from the earth, upon which so many men had lost their lives."[105] The depth of a trench also meant that besides smells emanating from the ground, others, imposed from above, would remained trapped within for long periods. An authentic 'trench smell' incorporated that of death with "a mixture of old gas, high explosive fumes and corruption;"[106] whereas a dugout "smelt of damp chalk, candle smoke, fags, rat dung, and damp, dirty, sweaty, lousy humanity."[107]

Rats were another integral component of the trenches and these conscript's experiences therein. Most descriptions incorporated them in matter of fact terms, alongside sand bags, dead bodies, the acrid smell of earth, and the noises of combat: "Mingled with these terrific crashes [of guns] were the screams of many rats, fighting and running about all over us."[108] But rats were most apparent in their search for food: "Anything we could not pack into our mess tin was vulnerable if left in a dugout or even while we slept."[109] And indeed, rats seemed to work voraciously whilst these men slept.

> I had a surprise yesterday morning. When I went to my pack for my ration bag (in which I keep my bread and iron rations) I found a neat hole gnawed in it, & a big one

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[104] Copson, op. cit. p.6.

[105] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.15.

[106] Abraham, op. cit. p.26.

[107] ibid p.31. Smells clearly formed an important part of this conscript's memories. In his discussion of trench foot, as noted in the previous chapter, he recalled the acrid smell caused by a change of dried but unwashed socks that were issued daily by the "authorities". (p.58.)

[108] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.10.

[109] Abraham, op. cit. p.59.

> right through the bag & half my bread & iron rations of biscuits gone! Rats of course -- they are numerous and most bold at night time.[110]

Boldness was probably the salient feature of trench rats, since they also pursued their quest in full vision of human beings: "One morning, in preparing for breakfast, I placed my small dole of bread just above the trench, where we happened to be, and immediately a large rat appeared and made awkwardly off with it. By rattling my rifle ... I made the rat drop the bread; after raking it in again and trimming the crust my meal was continued."[111]

Food was not the only quarry in which rats found interest. Thus "in one of the dug outs the other night, 2 men sat smoking by the light of candle very quiet -- all at once the candle moved and flickered. Looking up, they saw that a rat was dragging it away -- fast."[112] Though it appears that these men accepted the presence of rats alongside the other evils of trench life, they still made efforts to eliminate their existence: "An amusing & effective half hour can be spent with an entrenching-tool after dark -- slaying them!"[113] Yet such an exercise could sometimes be detrimental to the soldier. One conscript recalled noticing a rat poised on the tip of his boot, cleaning its whiskers. Raising his bayonet, he was about to stab it when the rat ran off: "It was just as well, for if I had missed him and stabbed my own foot I should almost certainly have been court martialled for 'self inflicted wound'."[114] Isaac

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[110] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 1.9.1918.

[111] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.23.

[112] Bass, op. cit. diary entry for 3.12.1916.

[113] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 1.9.1918.

[114] Abraham, op. cit. p.62.

Rosenberg summed up this superiority of rat over man in the trenches, when he addressed his "Break of Day in the Trenches" to

> A queer sardonic rat - ...
> It seems you inwardly grin as you pass
> Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes
> Less chanced than you for life...

An interesting comparison with the British trenches, often made by the conscripts themselves, were the German ones. In general, these were much deeper than those dug by the British. Thus one conscript lived in such a trench thirty feet below ground, which was very damp and infested with rats.[115] Yet another man recalled choosing new dugouts in Vimy Ridge: "There are German ones and were splendidly made, in many cases 15 feet to 20 feet deep with long corridors and recesses for sleeping in and all lined with boards."[116] Another of these men claimed the German trenches he entered with his unit in December 1917 were the finest he had ever seen, with well constructed dugouts twenty five feet below ground.[117] Yet the hallmark of Flanders was apparent even in these well protected structures: "Have seen some old German Dug-outs some are 50 foot deep and concreted, they make them very fine, but Oh they do smell of dead "bosche"."[118]

Dugouts within the trenches were the shelter most commonly known to infantry soldiers. Yet even they applied the name to a variety of abodes hollowed out of the earth, within the close

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[115] Bishop, op. cit. diary entry for 21.3.1917.

[116] Bryan G, IWM 80/28/1, diary entry for 1.6.1917.

[117] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.18.

[118] White, op. cit. letter of 14.10.1916.

vicinity of the front line. Thus Lt. Allfree recalled relocating his battery into a new section of the line: "I picked sites for the men's dugouts in a bit of copse to the right of the battery. These were to be just pits in ground, about five feet deep, which could be covered with corrugated iron and earth, and camouflaged."[119] Another conscript wrote of a "big dug-out under slag heap - [with] electric light."[120] A dugout could also be "in [an] old gun pit,"[121] or any other ground formation which could be covered either with corrugated iron or canvas: "we've had to get four posts and drag a sheet over the top, but really it's a jolly fine dug out."[122]

The latter description was of a bivouac -- a makeshift structure used by soldiers of every corps both in and out of the line. Civilians and soldiers uninitiated into the mysteries of existence in the British army life in France were unfamiliar with this form of shelter, as is apparent from the above letter. Bivouacs were not passed on to succeeding soldiers occupying a post, rather they were created afresh by each man or small group upon their arrival at a new location: "We immediately set to work, after having fed and fastened the horses, to make ourselves places of abode. Assailed with choppers, spades, spaces, bill hooks, and saws we ventured into a neighbouring wood and cut down suitable branches for making uprights and crossbars, over which we might fasten bivouac covers. These latter are large tarpaulin sheets very much after the style of a removal van cover."[123] However, bivouacs could also be "a

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[119] Allfree, op. cit. pp. 129-130.

[120] Grant, op. cit. diary entry for 3.3.1917.

[121] Bishop, op. cit. diary entry for 9.3.1917.

[122] White, op. cit. letter of 28.9.1916.

[123] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.3.

rude shelter made of sack on poles,"[124] "a waterproof arrangement on sticks,"[125] or anything else that came to hand:

> Our camp was composed of all sorts of shanties rigged up of wood & canvas. It seems that the army authorities did not seem to think artillery men required any sort of housing while on active service so they supplied nothing. In consequence the men had to make shift the best way they could to provide shelter for themselves. This they managed to do by stealing or to use the army word "scrounging" anything that may come in handy for the purpose. Those who were lucky had at sometime or another been able to annexe a sheet from a motor lorry or railway wagon & this would make a tidy bivouac for 4 or 5 men; others not so fortunate rigged up shelters about the size of a dog kennel which they had to creep into on their hands & knees.[126]

This conscript devoted many pages to descriptions of various bivouacs he constructed with other men, laying emphasis upon the scrounging activities they all engaged in.[127] Thus in one incident, "Holland found a dug out that had a front made to it of match boarding so we "pinched" this & cut it up with a saw as quickly as possible so that it should not be recognized. This made quite a good end to our tent. Soon after we had finished the Regimental SM came round looking for this wood. It appears that this dugout had been selected for the Colonel's quarters & there was a rare row when they found the front had gone."[128] This account also highlights the autonomous nature of the conscripts' daily existence behind the lines, in that their officers usually saw fit to guide them to a suitable site on which accommodation could be constructed. The nature and quality of such, however, was often totally dependant upon the initiative and expertise of each soldier. This issue was well

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[124] Jolley, op. cit. p.14.

[125] Eccles B F, IWM 82/22/1, letter of 18.9.1916.

[126] Jolley, op. cit. p.16.

[127] Scrounging is also discussed below, in the following section on food.

[128] Jolley, op. cit. p.30.

explained by the following sequence of diary entries, written by a conscript whose unit had just entered a certain section of the line:

31.5.1917	Went searching for a kip. Baulk and Clark found a good one for 3 so I joined on invitation.
1.6.1917	Day spent in improving dugout. [After five days the unit moves on to another sector.]
8.6.1917	We had to dig ourselves in for the night and it looks like rain. By 9.00 (sic) we had a nice dugout, and got down to it being very tired.
9.6.1917	Very nice rest, only the dirt kept falling in on us. We were in a nice mess this morning.
10.6.1917	Boarded up the sides and sandbags at the back to keep the dirt from falling in on us.[129]

Whatever their description, bivouac dugouts were basically exceedingly small shelters, not far removed from the ground. One conscript described building a bivouac for himself that was six feet in length and four feet in height, with straw upon the floor. However, it was in "terrible looking country -- if you dig 1 ft touch water ... Looks like rheumatism for some of us."[130] Given their average size, men could rarely do anything but sleep in bivouacs. Thus one conscript wrote of one "holding 9 people side by side and not many more than 8 feet long... Slept fairly decently but couldn't move a muscle during the night and got very stiff before morning."[131] Another man recalled a period in the front line in which eight men sat side by side in a cramped bivouac throughout the days, leaving the shelter only at night to

[129] Carey, op. cit.

[130] Bryan, op. cit. diary entry for 7.9.1917.

[131] Bass, op. cit. diary entry for 8.10.1916.

go on duty.[132] In a letter home, one conscript apologized for his lapse in communication due to the fact that "four of us are squatting on the floor of a tiny dug-out, elbow to elbow, so that it is more than difficult to write."[133] In general, however, dugouts were considered by most front line soldiers as a relative haven of safety. Possibly the cramped conditions inspired a feeling of coziness, or else a soldier's presence in a dugout meant a short release from duties -- for whatever reason "there was always something warm and welcoming about a dugout."[134]

Huts were a more substantial form of front line shelter, which was usually allocated to officers. In some cases, however, permanent artillery camps in the support line, which fed ammunition and supplies to the front line, were constructed of corrugated iron "Nissen" huts:

> Mine is like a barrel or a cheese cut vertically in half and the half then placed on the ground, flat side downwards. It is made of corrugated iron: there is a door in front and two windows, with panes of linen cloth , at each end. Round the hut is a low rampart of sand bags. The space between them and the sides is filled in with earth, and the whole forms a protection against bursting shells, at least against such shells as are not direct hits. On either side of the door some former occupant has arranged in the brown earth, small bits of chalk stone to make the words "Caterpillar Section, A S C" and has planted little clumps of daffodils and a few violets.[135]

These images of homely permanence were in direct contrast to those evoked by tent encampments. Some of these were but temporary abodes which housed succeeding waves of men passing through en-route. As such, they offered "tents with neither straw nor floor

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[132] Adams, op. cit. p.5.

[133] Evans, op. cit. letter of 12.12.1916.

[134] Abraham, op. cit. p.31.

[135] Henderson, op. cit. Part 5.

boards."[136] Moreover, these movement between these camps "caused us a lot of inconvenience and work as every camp, if only occupied for an hour, had to be left perfectly clean and tidy, and latrines etc. had to be dug in new camps where such did not exist. In addition there was the constant packing up of our belongings."[137]

Other camps were more permanent, offering tents of a more substantial nature: "Drew and Ryan have wooden beds and these are placed along the sides of the tent to the right and left of the door. Butcher, Hartley and I lie on the tarpaulin sheets that form the floor. Our blankets and kit are piled at the back of the tent and when night comes we lay down our beds with our feet pointing to the door. On the centre pole are hung our gas masks ready for any emergency."[138] Despite this apparent coziness, tents were insufficient protection against the elements: "Terrific thunder storm in evening. Tent blown in and flooded out."[139] In winter the situation was even worse: "It is no joke camping out this time of the year ... we are always flooded out."[140]

Some sections of the front line were situated in close proximity to villages, and thus cellars of houses abandoned by their civilian occupants would be used as dugouts. Describing one such village, a conscript noted that "many of the houses are in ruins. Many, though still inhabited, show gaping holes in their red roofs or white walls. British soldiers have made

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[136] W L Fisher, letter of 12.11.1917.

[137] Bradbury, op. cit. p.51.

[138] Henderson, op. cit. Part 14.

[139] Bishop, op. cit. diary entry for 28.6.1917.

[140] White, op. cit. letter of 8.11.1916.

themselves shelters in the shattered cottages and have taken possession of empty cellars for dug-outs."[141] Besides a proliferation of rats, the basic drawback of this form of shelter was the lack of light, which posed further problems for letter writing.[142] Overall, villages offered a variety of billets for these soldiers. Whilst marching between sectors and during periods of rest, empty schools and barns of various description were often used as shelter. At best, these had an "ample supply of hay for us to lay on spread over the barn floor. We noticed that all buildings had painted on the door posts their billet no. & the number of men it would accommodate."[143] At worst, men were billeted in "barns with mud floors and no windows, the door and various cracks in the plaster being the only places for light to enter. Here and there upon the ground were slimy puddles, making it difficult to find a suitable spot to deposit one's baggage, the only alternative being a few old wire hammock-beds."[144]

Most barns, stables and sheds were of an intermediate quality. As roofed structures they provided a refuge from the weather in a way that no dugout or bivouac could. In addition, some barns were "fitted with bunks on the ship pattern with wirenetting mattresses."[145] But in most cases soldiers slept on straw strewn upon the floor, which often also housed "plenty of mice & beetles. [&] Umpteen earwigs."[146] One conscript who was billeted in a stable

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[141] Henderson, op. cit. Part 8.

[142] Adams, op. cit. p.3; Thompson, op. cit. letter of 5.11.1918.

[143] Jolley, op. cit. p.12.

[144] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.9.

[145] Bryan, op. cit. diary entry for 30.5.1917.

[146] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 2.8.1918 and passim. See also for example: Grant, op. cit. diary entry for 16.2.1917; Bishop, op. cit. diary entry for 27.8.1917 and passim; Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 10.11.1916 and passim.

summed up the issue succinctly: "Pigs and the calf have a far better house than we do. With all reverence, can begin to realise now the birth of Jesus in a stable. People cannot realise [this] until they have experienced... [end of entry.]"[147]

Thus the negative aspects of these barns centred upon the fact that they were not constructed for human occupation, nor were they used exclusively to this end throughout the war. Hence a conscript noted of a barn in which he was billeted that "formerly this was an ammunition and food dump."[148] Another man recalled a barn that "had a row of brick posts 8 feet apart one side partly closed by a strip of canvas 6 feet high above which to the roof was nothing. It was really a large cart shed."[149] One conscript noted in his diary that "I was billeted in a barn which had been used as a hen house, so bivouaced (sic) out with Hunter, had a good time."[150]

Besides shelter, billets and trenches were also assessed according to the sleeping facilities they offered. The nature of trench warfare dictated perpetual awareness in case of enemy snipers, interspersed with incoming and outgoing bombardments. Hence the objective circumstances of warfare -- an intense degree of noise and activity -- made sleep "about as rare as strawberries."[151] The possibilities of rest were often reduced still further by the lack of sleeping arrangements. Thus one man noted "poor trench shelters to sleep in, only about 6

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[147] Bass, op. cit. diary entry for 25.10.1916.

[148] Bryan, op. cit. diary entry for 30.5.1917.

[149] Cobb, op. cit. pp. 6-7.

[150] Preston, op. cit. diary entry for 23.7.1917.

[151] Blore, op. cit. letter of 10.1.1917.

hours sleep in 4 days."[152] Such beds that were available were constructed of a wooden frame covered with wire netting. Sometimes men slept on the duck boards on the floor of the trench, or directly upon the chalk soil.[153] Another option was "funk holes holding one or two men [which] were dug to depths of up to 6 feet into the parapet side [of the trench] ... and one got used to sleeping in these on waterproof sheets. Some were several feet off the ground; others perhaps only a foot from the trench bottom."[154] At other times men simply sat "on the fire-step -- wrapped up in your ground sheet & any spare sand-bags or old lumps of canvas you can beg, borrow or pinch! And looking like an Egyptian mummy with a tin hat on -- you just sit & smoke!"[155] Another conscript who slept on a fire step recalled that "out of the first four days and nights in the firing line, I only had about three hours sleep!"[156]

Whilst on front line duty a soldier could be on a rota of two hours on and two hours off throughout a consecutive forty-eight hours, "thus having little proper rest."[157] Due to the short periods alloted for rest the men did not remove any particles of clothing, nor even their boots, for the entire duration of their front line duty.[158] Moreover, rats often clambered over

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[152] Grant, op. cit. diary entry for 25.1.1917.

[153] See for example: Abraham, op. cit. p.6 and passim; R D Fisher, op. cit. p.15 and passim; W L Fisher, op. cit. letter of 25.11.1917.

[154] Jamieson, op. cit. Part III, p.1.

[155] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 29.9.1918.

[156] Evans, op. cit. letter of 12.12.1916.

[157] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.24.

[158] See for example: Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 11.10.1916, in which he claims not to have removed his boots or puttees for five days, and passim.

the sleeping men, "so that we were obliged to cover our faces entirely with 'cap comforters'."[159] But it was the noise of guns which most prohibited sleep for those men not on duty: "One might as well be living in a huge drum on which a thousand savages are beating with different kinds of hammers."[160] Sleep therefore became "impossible, although eventually as one gets used to the sound it is a matter of being awakened and then falling asleep while the noise is going on."[161] As a result of these sporadic bouts of sleep within the perpetual din and constant duties, many men were exhausted and overwrought. Thus one conscript wrote of a severe bombardment which lasted several days:

> As a result of the recent experiences my nerves were not normal and I was unable to compose myself sufficiently to sleep ... At night we were put on sentry duty but being so dead tired it was quite impossible to keep awake in spite of the fact that we could hear the enemy cutting the wire in front.[162]

The reserve line, the third line of trenches which men usually entered for four days after four days in the front line,[163] offered more possibilities of sleep and rest. Since soldiers were not on an hourly rota of duty they could remove their jackets, trousers and boots.[164] In addition, the supply of blankets in this line was more plentiful, as one conscript noted of his first trench experience: "Had a blanket tonight for the first time since Etaples and turned in early to get

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[159] ibid p.10. See also Abraham, op. cit. p.76.

[160] Blore, op. cit. letter of 10.1.1917.

[161] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.3.

[162] Adams, op. cit. p.5.

[163] For a full discussion of the rotation of trench duties see below chapter 9, "Identity in War."

[164] Abraham, op. cit. p.106.

good benefit from our blankets."[165] In this light the various village billets were also viewed differently, since "the bit of rest we did have was very comforting -- in a stable."[166]

Sleeping arrangements worsened in 1918, when the structured lines of combat were abandoned, first in retreat and later in advance. The German attack in the spring caught the British army by surprise, causing most front line units to flee: "At 8 P.M. Fritz made a bombing raid which compelled us to retire. After a time there was a lull and we were able to get a sleep in a rather unconventional bed -- the gutter of the road."[167] The retreat continued for several weeks, dispersing units in all directions. Thus one man recalled coming upon an abandoned, hastily dug trench into which he and two comrades jumped, "immediately beginning to deepen it, for here we hoped to stay, not having slept a wink for forty-eight hours."[168] Yet after a few hours they had to evacuate this shelter:

> And now followed the saddest and most terrible part of the retreat, or so it impressed me. It was terrible not because of danger, for the enemy was following us within a half-mile's distance, but because of the utterly exhausted condition of the men, after half-a-week without sleep, moving, moving, digging, digging, and having very little to eat or drink ... the men were so fatigued that order was impossible, for they dragged along as best suited their feelings ... At times, too, men fell out and sat on the ground, too exhausted, or without the spirit to continue.[169]

Another man recalled hearing an order to halt in the midst of this long march, whereupon he dug a hole together with another man, into which they both crawled with a ground sheet. "We were very tired by now and dimly I heard someone say "Gas?" Someone else said "fuck the

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[165] Bass, op. cit. diary entry for 5.10.1916. See also: Abraham, op. cit. p.106.

[166] Evans, op. cit. letter of 12.12.1916.

[167] Adams, op. cit. p.11.

[168] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.54.

[169] ibid. p.56.

gas" and then I must have fallen asleep ... I woke up just as the sky was beginning to lighten, feeling pretty rough ... Our eyes looked like oysters in buckets of blood and it was obvious that we had been gassed."[170]

During the British counter attack, the last of the war, in the summer of 1918, sleeping conditions were no better. The constant mobility of the retreat continued, simply in the opposite direction. Thus functionality, both as a response to events and in its basic form of simply existing, was supreme, with men snatching a few hours of sleep whenever possible. One man wrote of crawling under a desk in a school in a small Belgian town,[171] whilst another recalled a night in which he lay down in exhaustion in the middle of a field. Upon awakening "I looked down and saw I had been lying alongside a dead German, he was just a boy; maggots were crawling from him, the sergeant saw him too and exclaimed "Christ almighty, poor bugger," I turned away and vomited, I always had a squeamish stomach."[172]

In assessing these conscript's perceptions of billets and dug-outs one may thus conclude that they were guided by two basic principles: the protection offered by the abode, both from bombardments and from the weather; and the sleeping facilities they incorporated. Moreover, it is interesting to note the mobility of these men, in a war that was essentially stagnant for long periods. As a result, the functional and temporary nature of their accommodation stands out:

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[170] Abraham, op. cit. p.106.

[171] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 22.10.1918.

[172] Creek, op. cit. p.52.

> Our new camp is in a field near the village of ____ (sic). When we arrived there on Easter Sunday [1918] a feeling of hopelessness came over me. How could we ever make this place habitable? Was our time to be taken up with perpetual changes, taking down of huts and putting them up again, carrying about of timber and tents and corrugated iron? Were we no sooner to be settled on one spot and grown accustomed to it than we were to be moved to another? These thoughts came over me as I stood in the rain looking dismally and helplessly around me at the sodden grass field.[173]

As a result of this constant movement one may highlight the comparative merits, or lack of such, attributed to the various forms of billets with which these conscripts became acquainted. Behind the lines men sought the cleanest and warmest form of shelter, when possible. In good weather the option of a bivouac shared amongst friends was deemed preferable to an inadequate barn or stable.[174] One conscript wrote of another solution: billeted in a shed "not fit to sleep in ... I & a couple of other fellows who have similar tastes as regards sleeping places, managed to sleep in an A.S.C. motor lorry."[175]

But overall, any accommodation was considered preferable to trenches and dugouts in the front line, in which comfort and safety were merely relative to complete exposure to the elements and the enemy in the combat zone. These men's perception of trench dugouts was therefore one of immense hardship, to an extent that exceeded any civilian conception. Late in 1916, the period in which the trenches should have been at their relative best, one conscript wrote home that "we are sleeping in some old broken down barns that will sound a bit queer to you, but they are a lot more comfortable than the trenches."[176] Since these barns often

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[173] Henderson, op. cit. Part 8.

[174] See also for example: Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 10.5.1917, and passim; Clark, op. cit. p.11 and passim.

[175] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 12.7.1918.

[176] Fraser, op. cit. letter of 20.11.1916.

gave scant shelter, the comparative condition of the trenches must have been truly appalling. As another conscript, who also compared a filthy barn to the front line noted: "Apart from the actual trenches, we never again visited such filthy billets."[177]

Hence filth, vermin, sleeping arrangements and shelter all became relative to these conscripts; and usually within a very short period of time. Before arriving at the front line they had no conception of the existence within it, and thus their expectations of shelter and comfort within an abode were still defined by their civilian identity, which had been processed through the military experiences of the training camps in England and France. This was apparent, for example, in a conversation between two "old soldiers" and a group of conscripts crossing to France for the first time:

> "But at least we have huts to sleep in," we objected. "Never a hut," they answered us; "just a waterproof sheet & a blanket unless you can pinch a blanket or two. It's a good thing for you fellows that you have two old hands going out with you. We'll soon show you what can be done with a sheet. We'll rig up a cosy little shack.[178]

Yet within weeks of experiencing trench life most of these men clearly placed existential considerations over cultural ones of propriety. The shape, size, quality of materials and appearance of an abode were irrelevant in face of sleep and shelter. Whilst a miner or a farm labourer probably experienced a shorter period of adjustment than a bank clerk or a civil servant, the process in itself was the same for all conscripts. Thus one conscript could sum up the issue in simple terms: "I am quite accustomed [to] sleeping in queer places now and under strange conditions too."[179]

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[177] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.9.

[178] Henderson, op. cit. p.3.

[179] Fraser, op. cit. letter of 20.11.1916.

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It is unlucky for thirteen to sit down to a meal
when rations have been issued for only seven.
If sun rises in the East, it is a sure sign that
there will be stew for dinner.[180]

Food:

Within the human considerations of warfare, food is undoubtedly supreme. A hungry man makes an inadequate soldier, and thus it is generally accepted that an army marches on its stomach. It appears that in the First World War soldiers also sat in trenches according to a similar axiom, since the writings examined in this study display an obsessive interest in hunger, food and its pursuit. Whereas lack of sleep and exposure to the elements, mud, dirt and lice are clearly awful, they are also endurable, since soldiers lived in such conditions throughout the war. But men cannot function without food. Irrespective of the soldierly or civilian status of an individual, lack or scarcity of food is an untenable human condition, much as an adequate supply of it is a necessity.

Food is also a question of expectations, which may be modified but never erased. Thus shelter or cleanliness may also be issues of expectation, but experience and adjustment may diminish them to a point of nullity. A body, however, expects to be fed on a permanent basis. The

[180] From a comic list of soldier's superstitions, in: Bass, op. cit. back cover of diary for 1918.

original expectation may be of a certain quality and quantity of food, which could be replaced with poorer samples, yet the demand for nourishment will not disappear. Moreover, hungry men "are very susceptible to cold, get bored easily, take increasingly little interest in others, and can eventually assume a 'don't care' attitude which resembles the zombie-like trance of utter exhaustion."[181] The essentially stationary nature of trench warfare made many soldiers doubly susceptible to these dangers. As C.M. Lloyd told Beatrice Webb, "The terrible monotony of the trenches concentrates all the men's thoughts and desires on food and drink."[182] This chapter will therefore focus upon these men's perceptions of their nourishment, both within the context of their existential conditions and their expectations.

Perceptions differ from facts in that they incorporate attitudes and interpretations, often as facts. Thus the official record of a soldier's daily rations was largely irrelevant, since none of these soldiers were aware of it. In other words, it may be interesting to note that in 1916 a soldier should officially have received 1.25lb of bread per day,[183] which was approximately one quarter of a loaf. Yet it meant little to the conscript who wrote the following diary entry on August 25, 1916: "... never had such a rotten time ... rations scarce,

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[181] Richard Holmes, Firing Line, op. cit. p.125.

[182] Beatrice Webb, unpublished diaries; quoted in David Englander & James Osborne, "Jack, Tommy, and Henry Dubb: The Armed Forces and the Working Class," The Historical Journal, 21, 3 (1978), p.600.

[183] D. Winter, Death's Men, op. cit. p.147. The complete list of a daily food quota per men in 1916 was: "1.25 lb. of meat, 1.25 lb. of bread, 0.25 lb. of bacon, 3 oz. cheese, 0.50 lb. fresh vegetables and small quantities of tea, jam, salt, butter, mustard, pepper, condensed milk and pickles." (ibid.) This should have provided a soldier 4,300 calories a day as opposed to 3,859 consumed by the average British civilian. For a full discussion of health and food in the First World War see: J. Winter, The Great War and the British People, op. cit.

as many as 24 in a loaf sometimes, and never less than 8."[184] This disparity highlights the difficulties of supplying troops in time of combat,[185] and the specific problems facing the British economy throughout the Great War.[186] But to the aforementioned soldier these were of little interest, since his perception was one of hunger, substantiated by his factual record of at least eight soldiers to one loaf of bread. This perception was coloured by his existential condition of being "up to the knees in mud ... and absolutely impossible to be without lice,"[187] and his expectation of a sufficient share in the rations provided.

Any discussion of the relative conditions of hunger, satisfaction and abundance of food experienced by these men must therefore be in comparison to their perceptions of the regular fare consumed by a combat soldier. The most comprehensive list of such found in these writings was noted by a caterpillar driver:

> We have two menus, one for ordinary occasions when we are living a settled life, the other for times when we are moving about and when the bringing up of supplies is difficult.
> The first one is something like this.
> Breakfast. Tea, Bread, Bacon.
> Dinner. Stew (or Roast Meat if there is a good cook)
> Potatoes (sometimes) Boiled Rice (occasionally).
> Tea. Tea, Bread, Butter, Jam or Cheese.
> Biscuits and Cheese are generally to be had for supper by those who wish them.

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[184] Clark, op. cit.

[185] For a full discussion of this issue see: Martin Van Creveld, Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton, (CUP, 1977); especially ch. 1, 4.

[186] For a discussion of this problem see for example: T. Wilson, The Myriad Faces of War, op. cit. chs. 11, 13; D. French, British Economic and Strategic Planning 1905-1915, op. cit. passim; A. Offer, The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation, op. cit.

[187] Clark, op. cit. diary entry for 25.8.1916.

The second menu is after this style.
Breakfast. Tea, Biscuits, Bully Beef.
Dinner. "Macconochies" i.e. tinned meat and vegetables.[188]
Tea. Tea, Biscuits, Jam.[189]

The staple diet in the front line trenches differed only slightly from that described above:[190]

> For breakfast we had a slice of cold fried bacon with tea and a biscuit or small piece of bread; for dinner a stew of bully beef and onions, or, if we were lucky, a "Machonocie" ration -- a tin of cooked meat and vegetables; for tea, biscuits, jam, and tea; for supper, what was left over, usually only bully beef.[191]

Troops on the march breakfasted on a similar menu, "a dinner of Iron rations (Bully Beef and biscuits) which are partaken of as opportunity arised and the third meal of the day is prepared by the Cook at the end of the day's journey and very often consists of a soup made of Bully Beef and Pork and Beans."[192]

It is clear that bully beef was the back-bone of the British culinary experience in France. A tin of "bully" was an integral component of fighting order, alongside a shovel, flares and three

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[188] The name derives from the manufacturer, Messrs Maconochie Bros. of London. The "Analytic Report from the Lancet Laboratory" noted that "each tin contains 3/4 lb of fresh boneless beef together with potatoes, haricot beans, onions, carrots, and gravy. ... It provides a very palatable, attractive dish, nourishing and stimulating. We found the contents of the tin sound, and an examination for metal in the gravy gave a quite negative result." (Lancet, 27.11.1915, p.2000.)

[189] Henderson, op. cit. Part 39.

[190] At the start of the war a standard scale of rations, for all troops, was fixed. This was revised in 1917, "as the world shortage increased and provision became more difficult. ... [Thus] with the concurrence of the medical authorities, two scales were introduced, viz., one for troops at the front, and another, a smaller ration, for GHQ and troops on the line of communication." ("Note by the Quartermaster-General to the Forces," Statistics of the Military Effort, op. cit. p.841.)

[191] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.15.

[192] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.2.

bandoliers of ammunition.[193] Thus beyond nourishment, these men found their diet monotonous, moving many to note "bully beef again for dinner;"[194] or "we get so much "bully" that I loathe the sight of it."[195] The tins themselves also presented some problems: "Each tin has an opener which in most cases fails to open the tin properly & then one has to finish the job with the opener in your jackknife (sic). You would then have great difficulty in getting the meat to come out of the tin whole so you would have to dig it out in chunks... Further unless you were very careful you could get a very ugly wound from the jagged edges of the tin."[196] Bully beef was usually eaten directly from the tin, but it was also possible to fry "it with an onion or two,"[197] or even to incorporate it into a stew, which was another staple dish of the British army:

> Army stew is indescribable. It consists of many things, and is made according to the taste of the cook and the materials at his disposal. "Macconochies", rich in fat, form the basis, a few tins of pork and peas or beans are thrown in, a piece of fresh meat cut into small pieces and perhaps some potatoes are added: the whole is well boiled and the result is "stew". It is known popularly as "S.O.S." -- Same Old Stew -- though I have heard of other interpretations.[198]

Another conscript "made the interesting discovery that rice was sometimes added to the stew in order to camouflage the maggots in the meat."[199]

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[193] Adams, op. cit. p.6.

[194] Bass, op. cit. diary entry for 5.10.1916, and passim; see also for example Acklam, op. cit. 9.12.1917 and passim; Holdsworth, op. cit. p.2. and passim.

[195] Thompson, letter of 3.8.1918.

[196] Jolley, op. cit. p.3.

[197] Ackalm, op. cit. diary entry for 9.2.1917.

[198] Henderson, op. cit. Part 39.

[199] Abraham, op. cit. p.66.

In the later stages of the war jam was invariably lemon marmalade, which was also used for sticking pictures to the wall. Sometimes another jam was supplied, which was "almost tasteless stuff from Australia, labelled 'peach and melon'."[200] Often it "was not to the liking of the troops who heaved it over the trench parapet in bomb fashion."[201] Bread was "always in the form of a round Coburg loaf,"[202] whereas army biscuits, another mainstay of the soldiers' diet, were "of concrete consistency,"[203] "just like dog biscuits."[204] "It was impossible to bite through them until you had worried them with your teeth for a long time & by that time all your jam or jelly had either dropped off or got all over your hands & clothes."[205] One conscript claimed he "broke one front tooth upon them before I had been in France a month."[206]

Variations on these menus were not frequent, but they were possible. Thus a conscript enjoyed "Rice and figs for dinner for a change,"[207] another man wrote of stewed barley and

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[200] ibid. p.25.

[201] Jamieson, op. cit. Part II, p.5.

[202] Abraham, op. cit. p.65. "When the bread ration in France was reduced from 1.25 to 1 lb [in 1917], the medical authorities demanded an issue of 2 oz rice daily and 2 oz oatmeal three times a week. In due course of time it was ascertained, however, that the troops would not eat more than 1 oz rice a day, and the latter scale for rice and 6 oz oatmeal weekly was adopted." ("Note by the Quartermaster-General to the Forces," op. cit. p.843.)

[203] Jamieson, op. cit. Part II, p.5.

[204] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.6.

[205] Jolley, op. cit. p.2.

[206] Henderson, op. cit. Part 39.

[207] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 23.11.1916.

prunes,[208] or even a rabbit stew.[209] A further possibility was cooking upon stoves, mostly improvised:

> Drew has made a stove out of an old petrol tin. He has cut a round hole in one side, and a number of small slits on top. When the flame is directed through the hole in the side the air within becomes rapidly very hot indeed, and it is easy to boil water or to cook food upon the perforated top.[210]

On a daily basis stoves were "a great benefit to us at night as we were able to cook porridge & make cocoa for our suppers. Our cook would always give us a supply of oatmeal when we asked & we used to cook this at night. He was supposed to give us oatmeal porridge for breakfast at times but preferred to dole it out to us instead & so save himself the trouble."[211] When supplies permitted, stoves were also used for frying potatoes, or bully beef and onions, or even Welsh rarebit, made out of bread and "a large slab of cheese, which we have saved from our allowance at tea."[212]

Rations were most scarce in the trenches, where men were absolutely dependant upon the supplies sent up from the reserve lines. Ration parties from each unit brought up the food each night, "which invariably meant running the gauntlet of enemy shelling...

> [Hot] meals cooked at the transport lines were carried on the back in metal containers with rope loops for the shoulders and reached from the neck to the hips, really quite heavy when full. Bread and jam was issued not over- generously but being based by the quarter-master on the front line strength of the previous day, as reported by each company field telephone, occasionally became a bonus from heavier casualties. These

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[208] Grant, op. cit. diary entry for 23.6.1917.

[209] Jolley, op. cit. p.22.

[210] Henderson, op. cit. Part 14.

[211] Jolley, op. cit. p.30.

[212] Henderson, op. cit. Part 14.

other rations [including margarine, lumps of cheese and packets of free issue cigarettes] were carried in small sacks.[213]

Yet men sometimes found themselves "temporarily without food,"[214] or, more often, simply hungry due to a shortage of rations: "Thanks to our lousy Q.M.S. shortage of grub as usual -- 1 loaf for 4 men for 24 hours duty!!"[215] It was in these situations that the quality and quantity of food became a relative issue, as long as it could be secured. This is apparent, for example, from the diary of one conscript who kept a meticulous account of the food he was offered and consumed. The following description is typical: "Rations bad:- bully for breakfast, 1/4 loaf and no biscuits. Luckily Sandy had a bit of rice so made ourselves some tea. Then Asker came up from wagon line with some Quaker Oats which we had for supper."[216] Another solution to front line shortage was given by a conscript who claimed that "owing to a none too plentiful supply of rations we decide to make one meal of dinner & tea, making two meals a day."[217]

These situations of shortage were periodical, usually reflecting upon the location of a trench section or the state of the war, rather than upon any preconceived strategy. These fluctuations were exemplified in the diary of a conscript who recorded several stints in front line trenches throughout 1917. In January he complained daily of hunger, noting that "food awful. Breakfast 1/2 slice of bread (bacon or cheese). Din. 1 mug of soup. Tea 2 biscuits (jam,

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[213] Jamieson, op. cit. Part II, P.5.

[214] Adams, op. cit. p.5.

[215] Bryan, op. cit. diary entry for 24.8.1917.

[216] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 22.4.1918, and passim.

[217] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 30.8.1917.

butter)."[218] Early in March the "food [is] a bit better. 1 loaf to 8 men. cheese stew and jam."[219] In mid April the "food [is] a lot better,"[220] whilst in his trench duty of mid July "food [is] pretty good."[221] Yet by the end of August "food [is] not A1. Cook over tin lid with rag and candles."[222] Whereas in October "conditions in trenches awful. Food not over plentiful owing to feeding of many German prisoners taken at Ypres."[223] His experiences in mid November were of "food very uncertain and scarce,"[224] a situation which deteriorated into "suffering a wee bit from hunger. Rations have not come and have been without food all day."[225] His final entry on the subject, six days later, was that "food is awfully scarce we are all weak and faint through hunger were with[out] food at all for two days."[226]

Shortages were also apparent in reserve line trenches and camps. Voigt, who was in a labour battalion, described breakfast as "a fragile wisp of bacon ... [and] a piece from the previous day's bread ration."[227] In other camps "the ration lorry does not come and there is no bacon for breakfast, nor bread for tea. Or an additional ten or twelve men will arrive unexpectedly

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[218] Bishop, op. cit. diary entry for 28.1.1917, and passim to 12.2.1917.

[219] ibid, memo written at the bottom of diary page covering 26.2.1917 - 4.3.1917.

[220] ibid. entry for 13.4.1917.

[221] ibid, entry for 12.7.1917.

[222] ibid, entry for 31.8.1917.

[223] ibid, entry for 19.10.1917.

[224] ibid, entry for 17.11.1917.

[225] ibid, entry for 19.11.1917.

[226] ibid, entry for 25.11.1917.

[227] Combed Out, op. cit. (1920 edition) p.15.

and the food which was meant to serve for 48 has to be eked out to satisfy 60. Or perhaps the lorry comes but brings no fresh meat and there is only "bully beef" for dinner."[228] This latter comment highlights the manner in which perceptions were coloured by expectations: when food was short the emphasis was laid upon the quantity distributed; when food was sufficient, the emphasis was upon quality i.e. disappointment in the lack of fresh meat. This duality is apparent also in the following description of shortage:

> July 23rd ... For dinner we had boiled rabbit & we did enjoy it. We all got a decent portion & it was a welcome change to bully stew. ... July 25 ... More rabbit for dinner but now we get a much smaller portion. In fact the cook called me back today & took one piece back from my dixie as he had accidently (sic) dropped 2 pieces in mine about 2" square.[229]

On the first day this conscript noted the quality of the food as a result of it being plentiful; on the second day his reference was merely to quantity due to a feeling of hardship.

A common method of overcoming food shortages, especially in the rear lines where men could walk into the surrounding countryside, was scrounging. "In other words 'pinching' or picking up anything loose we might find at any neighbouring cookhouse. We visited one place where the cook very kindly gave us four tins of Pork and Beans and 4 packetfuls of biscuits."[230] To some men this became an instinctive survival measure, exercised whenever the opportunity arose. Thus one man wrote of a train journey which had "innumerable stops, and on one occasion somebody managed to scrounge a few bottles of champagne and tins of Nestle's swiss milk, which made an excellent cocktail."[231] Another man wrote that "I have

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[228] Henderson, op. cit. Part 15.

[229] Jolley, op. cit. p.22.

[230] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.6.

[231] Barraclough, op. cit. p.4.

been able to confiscate 72 bars of Nestles chocolate. We don't go now for a bar or two, we want the box."[232] A third noted quite starkly that he "pinched some spuds from a field on the way up last night so have a bon dinner."[233] Raiding potato fields was a common pursuit for many soldiers, "to the great consternation of their owners who afterwards put in an unsuccessful claim for damages: we were therefore able to have boiled potato suppers ... This was a good job as our rations still consisted of biscuits and no bread."[234]

Other men acquired the habit of scrounging with greater difficulty:

> We've had a real struggle for existence lately ... To we novices in the art of 'scrounging' it seems that the real likelihood of getting bread at a certain place is in inverse proportion to the apparent likelihood. We go to the boulangerie & are told bread is 'na-poo' or 'farine tout fini!' but one gets a loaf from an ironmonger's shop or perhaps a forge or a 'pub' with comparative ease.[235]

Yet hunger reduced men to behaviour they would consider unthinkable under normal circumstances. One conscript recalled marching out of the trenches. Halting "beside a small wood ... I saw a couple of soldiers sitting beside a fire warming a tin of food, one got up to go ... [and] the other turned his head and in a flash I grabbed the tin and bolted between our column ... To what lengths hunger will drive a man."[236]

Hunger and scrounging appeared to have reached a peak throughout the spring retreat of 1918, and the following summer Advance. In the initial days of retreat any semblance of

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[232] Hynd, op. cit. letter of 24.5.1918.

[233] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 29.8.1917.

[234] Bradbury, op. cit. p.51.

[235] Davies, op. cit. letter of 13.1.1918.

[236] Creek, op. cit. p.41.

organization collapsed, and men lived off their remaining iron rations. But within days field kitchens were set up along the road, "at which a man was distributing soup to all who came for it, and it was good, and thick, and hot."[237] Yet once the supply lines were restored rations were still short. "Sometimes one loaf had to do for fifteen or twenty men for the day."[238] Empty villages from which the civilian inhabitants had fled were a major source of scrounging at this time: "Still retreating, we were taken to another village, where we managed to get a bit of rest (and the mail was brought up). We also had a good feed in this village, as the civilians had evacuated same & left behind them fowls, rabbits, etc. which we were soon cooking in our field kitchen."[239] Another man came upon a cellar full of wine and creme de menthe, which he consumed to the point of oblivion, sleeping soundly for the first time after a week of constant retreat.[240] The mobility of the summer advance also made it difficult to establish permanent lines of supply. Thus in September 1918 one conscript recalled eating "two spoonfuls of plain boiled unsweetened rice, that was the last I had for three days ... On the third day a three ton lorry came with boxes of rations and a little ammunition, we had hard biscuits, a tin of bully beef, jam and pork and beans."[241] In October another man wrote that "no rations have turned up to-day, so we are on 'iron rations'."[242] Yet the heavy casualties suffered in this campaign also produced circumstances

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[237] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.56, and also p.60.

[238] ibid. p.62.

[239] Curtis F R, unpublished account, IWM 87/17/1, p.4. See also Adams, op. cit. p.8.

[240] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.60.

[241] Creek, op. cit. p.53.

[242] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 2.10.1918.

of abundance: "The number of men was now so greatly reduced that ... we had more rations than we could possibly eat -- an unusual state of affairs."[243]

Parcels from England were a "main standby"[244] as a supplementary source of food, representing both necessity and luxury. Besides the tangible connection with home, these parcels often contained condiments that assuaged pangs of hunger: "Rations were rather short, and I can tell you I was pleased and it was nice chocolates and nice apples."[245] Even when nice, parcels were often a major source of food: "Bully and biscuits again, have had no bread for 5 days. Hope I have a parcel soon."[246] In the spring retreat of 1918 "it would have been bad for us without the contents of parcels sent from home."[247] Whereas in the subsequent advance one man thanked his parents for supplementing his iron rations with "paste & 'Tuna'."[248] Parcels were clearly created with the notion of these men suffering from basic shortages, as is apparent from the following letter: "Do not send fruit, it goes rotten. I notice you have sent a plain cake and butter, it is not so necessary now as we get bread -- A.S.C. bread is not half bad."[249] When supplies were sufficient parcels offered a taste of civilian life: "This is a red letter day. My parcel came this morning with a tin of peaches, loaf and butter, fish paste, tobacco, sleeping helmet, chocolate and pair of socks and a towel. Had

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[243] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.83.

[244] Jamieson, op. cit. Part II, p.5.

[245] Abrey, op. cit. letter of 30.10.1916.

[246] Carey, op. cit. diary entry for 13.4.1917.

[247] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.62.

[248] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 2.10.1918.

[249] Eccles, op. cit. letter of 18.9.1916.

peaches for sweet at dinner and fish paste for tea. Grand."[250] And one man achieved total luxury from a Christmas hamper containing roast chicken, tinned salmon, cake, crystallized figs, chocolate, raisins, nuts and fine cigars. He shared this feast with his trench mates, who "were just like animated chunks of mud, but still we managed to thoroughly enjoy it."[251]

Christmas dinner was a high point of the culinary year, which the army authorities "tried to make ... as cheerful as possible, Officers supplying beer, oranges, and fresh meat and Christmas pudding."[252] Even relatively poor spreads were enhanced by a general feeling of good-will between officers and men. Thus one conscript who was in the front line recalled his festive dinner consisting "chiefly of 'stew'. The Captain comes round during the meal and consoles us for the absence of Xmas puddings by telling us that owing to the activity of German submarines a large consignment of puddings have gone to the bottom of the channel. After dinner nuts and oranges and cigarettes are distributed."[253] This conscript found compensation two weeks later, upon receiving a plum pudding in a "parcel of 'good things'"[254] from his mother. Other men, who were located in proximity to a YMCA canteen, combined their own resources with those of the army to make the day a memorable and satisfying one: "Dinner of pork, potatoes, cabbage and plum pudding. Also got paid 5 francs which we all pooled to get tinned fruit etc. Tinned salmon and cake for tea, so not done so badly... We had tinned pears, peaches, lobster, nuts, chocolate, biscuits etc. with beer, rum

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[250] Bass, op. cit. diary entry for 10.10.1916.

[251] Evans, op. cit. letter of 28.12.1916.

[252] Clark, op. cit. p.7.

[253] Harris, op. cit. diary entry 25.12.1916.

[254] ibid. entry for 10.1.1917.

and champagne."[255] Yet even these achievements pale in comparison to "16 Geese, 4 Hams, plenty of vegetables & ... Free Beer also, the men say they never had such a feed in the army before."[256] But reality returned together with a new year, and "the good old Bully is getting a thrashing now."[257]

During periods of rest behind the lines soldiers often found respite from army rations and cooking in the farms dotted around the countryside. Fresh supplies of produce and cooked meals could be secured for very reasonable prices. Thus one conscript found himself near "a rare country village, an "Ideal Blighty" one, we get large new laid eggs for 2d and milk for 3d a quart that's when funds permit."[258] Another man recalled a farmhouse from which he was "able to obtain eggs (2.5d and 3d each) and fresh milk, and took full advantage of this privilege. I also obtained some sugar and quaker oats from the village, and by lighting a fire in the brazier I picked up ... [I] was enabled to feed very well for a fortnight."[259]

The meals offered at these farmhouses were invariably of egg and chips. "This was a popular feed with the "tommies" at all French estaminets. Possibly because it was reminiscent of fried fish & chips in "blighty"."[260] Besides estaminets these men often mention going into "[an]

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[255] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 25.12.1916.

[256] IWM Misc 263, letter of 11.1.1917.

[257] ibid.

[258] Clark, op. cit. diary entry for 23.4.1917.

[259] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.5.

[260] Jolley, op. cit. 41.

old woman's house after tea for egg and chips;"[261] or "a wayside cottage where we get "Eggs, Chips & Coffee," quite a good meal for 1 franc 4 centm (sic)."[262] Prices in estaminets and other established eateries, usually in towns rather than villages, were slightly higher. Thus one conscript described an evening in St. Omer: "Had tea at one place -- awful price 2 Francs for 2 eggs pot of tea & 1 slice of bread & butter. Went to another place & had 2 eggs fried potatoes tea bread & butter galore & pastries -- 2 francs 40."[263] A typical estaminet "smelt of stale tobacco, burning fat and steaming clothes."[264] It had "a kitchen with a smaller room opening off it. In the latter sat an old man peeling potatoes. In the larger room at the wooden table sat half a dozen soldiers enjoying the fried eggs and potatoes and coffee which the hostess made continuously upon the bright black stove ... At last Madame placed before me my coffee and eggs. How good they were![265] In addition to the culinary experience, estaminets also offered a mental respite from a military existence. One conscript had "a fine supper in a kitchen behind a little shop -- omelette, bread & butter & rum & coffee -- the goods. Parlez-vousing in great style with the old girl. Made a very enjoyable evening, almost forgot about the war."[266]

Cigarettes were another major source of comfort, sought and smoked with an ardour second only to that reserved for the pursuit of food. Smoking was a major occupation for soldiers at

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[261] Acklam, op. cit. 20.1.1917 and passim; see also for example Bass, Thompson, Creek, Clark op. cit. passim.

[262] Harris, op. cit. diary entry for 26.12.1916.

[263] Bryan, op. cit. diary entry 23.9.1917.

[264] Voigt, op. cit. (1920 edition) p.36.

[265] Henderson, op. cit. Part 11.

[266] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 17.10.1917.

all times. Thus in a rest camp Church Army Hut "we all sat around the fire and the chaplain provided fags. Sang a few hymns, then sat and smoked while he gave an address. Altogether a dull performance."[267] In the front line they were a calming influence: "After a night on the fire-step, a cigarette pulls you together wonderfully, and at other times too."[268] Cigarettes were often also given as presents by officers: "Parade after breakfast for a distribution of cigarettes by Capt. Apted who escorted us out ... He is returning back today."[269] Another man recalled that for Christmas 1917 "some kind person, probably an officer on leave, sent us a large crate of cigarettes, we had about four hundred each."[270] A shortage of tobacco therefore greatly upset these men, especially when they were in the trenches: "All the chaps dying for a smoke and sweating on 'fag issue' tonight but none came up, also no mail so they are getting pretty well fed up."[271] Each soldier received thirty cigarettes per week in their 'fag issue,' but "the ones we get are packed specifically for troops I expect & are not half so good as the ones you sent."[272]

Cigarettes could be purchased for very reasonable prices in the mobile canteens and YMCA huts. "You will be interested Fred to know that one of our fellows bought a tin of 50 Gold Flake cigarettes this morning in the Canteen for elevenpence, I wish I could send you some

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[267] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 22.4.1917.

[268] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 13.9.1918.

[269] Harris, op. cit. diary entry for 18.12.1916.

[270] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.41.

[271] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 9.12.1917.

[272] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 13.9.1918.

of your favourites at proportionate prices."[273] In comparison, an officer complained of the fluctuations in price due to the exchange rate: "For instance you can get a box of cigarettes for 11d if you give them a shilling, but if you offer a 6d and coppers it costs you 1/1."[274] Mobile canteens in the rear lines and rest camps were a further source of food. Long marches were punctuated by "tea at YMCA usual tin of tea & 1d packet of biscuits."[275] Chocolate could be bought for 3.5d a bar,[276] and "tin fruits, packets of biscuits, duty free cigarettes"[277] could also be purchased.[278] At one such canteen a conscript "saw several chaps sucking at condensed milk tins and as I craved something sweet I bought a tin, punctured a hole on each side and sucked away; it was nectar, this was my first initiation into sucking sweet condensed milk."[279] Scrounging was apparent here too. During the Spring Retreat of 1918 another man "heard of an Expeditionary Force canteen deserted near by so went for booty. Got fags, biscuits, tins of milk and all sorts of things including umpteen bottles of whiskey. Chaps were lying about drunk all over the place."[280] When he got back

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[273] Tonkyn, op. cit. letter of 10.6.1917.

[274] Gale, op. cit. letter of 28.7.1916. For a full discussion of pay and money see below chapter 8, "The Institution and War."

[275] Bryan, op. cit. diary entry for 4.9.1917.

[276] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 3.8.1918.

[277] Abraham, op. cit. p.12.

[278] An insight into the popularity and necessity of these canteens may be found in the fact that by the end of 1918 the annual turnover of all canteen trading was £33.5 million. (Statistics of the Military Effort, op. cit. p.875.)

[279] Creek, op. cit. p.39.

[280] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 25.3.1918.

to his unit he found "Half the battery drunk on whiskey. Lt. Phillips opened all water bottles and emptied it out."[281]

Drunkenness was not unique to this situation, since alcohol was sought by these men at every opportunity as an antidote to their existence. On the one hand there was the official 'rum ration' issued in the trenches by the army authorities. When first introduced in 1914, the allotment was "one jar per 64 men and a man received a gill a day. By 1918 a division consumed 300 gallons or a third of a pint per man weekly."[282] As a fortifying measure in face of nerves and the cold it was clearly effective: "We have drawn our rum issue the last two nights for the first time. By Jove, it's strong stuff, but tres bon. We only get 3 spoonfuls but it warms you up."[283] Another man recalled his sergeant issued the rum, which was considered "rough & tumble,"[284] in an empty six cube Oxo tin,[285] "to steady our chattering teeth and shivering bodies. And how we loved that rum! It really is extraordinary what the human body can stand when young."[286]

The rum issue was also instrumental in sending men into action. Writing to his parents of his first battle, one young conscript proudly noted that "I went through it far better than I ever

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[281] ibid.

[282] James Brent-Wilson, The Morale and Discipline..., op. cit. p.57.

[283] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 11.10.1917.

[284] ibid. diary entry for 3.11.1917.

[285] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.12.

[286] ibid. p.21.

imagined -- it must have been the rum ration I had just before we went over."[287] For some men, however, the prospect of battle could not be borne with the aid of "an egg-cup full"[288] of rum, and much more was devoured.

> Q. There's a lot of talk of the Infantrymen getting drunk when they went over the top -- was that true?
> A. Was it true? Oh yes. I've seen them when they was drove over the top... They used to count down (to zero) and then "Over the top" and then the M[ilitary] P[olicemen] would come along and see that they had all gone over. Some was coughing, some was spewing, some was sipping, some was shouting -- ah it was terrible.[289]

Bringing in the wounded men, and rounding up the survivors of a hard battle, one man noted that "some had so much rum they were canned. ... by the singing and noise one would think they had been to a fair and not over the top."[290]

Coming out of the line after action was always an occasion for the distribution of alcohol: "We arrived in Arras about 5.30 a.m. Sunday morning, had a good tot of rum which very near knocked us all drunk, cigarettes, chocolate and cake were supplied by the Padre ... it nearly made us wish we came out of the line every day."[291] The rest periods behind the lines offered ample opportunity for drinking: "To finish their days most of the fellows drowned themselves in cheap wines at the estaminets, and then rolled unsteadily 'home,' singing aloud while others more sober attempted to push them into bed."[292] One man frequented a farm

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[287] Eccles, op. cit. letter of 18.9.1916.

[288] Rudge, op. cit. p.19.

[289] ibid (transcript of an oral history project), p.20.

[290] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 24.2.1917.

[291] Clark, op. cit. p.10.

[292] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.41.

of French peasants who gave him free beer,[293] which was also regularly distributed at concerts: "A good tuck-in and free booze! What more could delight a soldier's heart?"[294]

As a summary of these men's attitude to their existential conditions this latter comment is undoubtedly apt. Within their enclosed world of functionality resulting from combat, nourishment not only ensured survival, but also offered solace. Thus one conscript, in considering his experiences of food in the war, found himself puzzled by the grasp food and alcohol had over these men, and in so doing he presents an interesting appraisal of their character:

> If the other men on the section were asked whether they would rather do a twelve hours night or go without dinner for one day I do not believe that one of them would choose the latter alternative. It has been a constant source of wonder to me, the hardships and discomforts and dangers that men will put up with, if only they get their daily 'rations'. They will sleep on the ground underneath the caterpillar with the rain running in little channels below their water-proof sheets and rising gradually till it soaks their blankets and they will get up quite cheerfully in the morning ready for the day's work, but if, by any chance, there is no breakfast some day they will grumble for hours and treasure up the grievance for months. They will go up to the battery at night when the enemy is dropping shells all around and they will go about their work unconcernedly, but if they think that they are being defrauded of their 'rum ration' nothing will pacify them. They accept the fact of the war and of their part in it -- one of the greatest revolutions that could take place in the life of any man, but they bitterly resent the injustice of a quarter-master-sergeant who does not give them their 'issue' of potatoes.[295]

The issue of potatoes, or any other nourishment may therefore offer another insight into the identity of these men. Food appeared to offer them a certain sense of dignity and continuity with their civilian background: whereas the war was something entirely beyond their control, the provision of food was their inalienable right, as civilians or soldiers. As civilians they

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[293] Bishop, op. cit. diary entries for 30.10.1917 - 4.11.1917.

[294] Barraclough, op. cit. p.2. See also W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 3.11.1917.

[295] Henderson, op. cit. Part 39.

expected to be fed, and as soldiers they expected no less. The point of disparity lay in the quantity and quality of food they expected to be offered. Thus within their military identity they learnt to reduce their expectations to the point of existence.

As noted above, in times of hunger the civilian or soldierly identity of an individual was irrelevant in face of survival. When "food was short ... [men] were reaching the point of despair."[296] And when food was to be found, one accepted it without enquiring into its merits: "Bradshaw had left most of his fastidiousness on the filthy tables of the Etaples dining-huts, so drank from a stranger's mess-tin without recoiling."[297] Thus one may conclude that when hunger prevailed these conscripts had no identity, beyond that of human beings striving for survival. It was at these times that men would resort to behaviour which would be totally unacceptable to their civilian values -- looting and scrounging. Yet within circumstances of relative plenty, they were appalled that human beings could be so desperate. Thus during the Summer Advance of 1918 one conscript was in a large rest camp:

> Went in for dinner and saw a Jerry corporal with escort, picking up all the biscuit, cheese and bully left on the floor by the first dinner sitting and putting it all in a sandbag. Then 12 prisoners came in for dinner. He dished out their tea and then divided out the contents of the sandbag. Strange to think that men should be reduced to picking up scraps off the floor.[298]

In times of plenty, or at least satiation, the material substance of the nourishment they were offered appeared to influence these conscripts' identity. A soldier ate bully beef and army biscuits as his staple diet, condiments with which most civilians were totally unacquainted.

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[296] Creek, op. cit. p.51.

[297] Tilsley, op. cit. p.12.

[298] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 3.8.1918.

Even when creating a stew, a dish with which the latter were familiar, they were aware of doing so in a manner alien to their civilian counterparts: "To-day we are in luck -- there is a comely stew of tinned rabbit, bully & tinned 'pork & beans' (e'en a goodly mix up, no doubt, but a treat to us I can tell you, Ma)."[299] Hence within these meals lay the dichotomy of their identity, which could not be reconciled since its basis was existence rather than principle. Reflecting upon this issue, one conscript wrote of "the queerest Sunday I have ever spent. 1.30 pm thinking of Sunday dinner at home. We have midday dinner as a special treat -- the old bully."[300]

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Certain people would not clean their buttons,
Nor polish buckles after latest fashions,
Preferred their hair long, putties comfortable...

(Ivor Gurney, "The Bohemians")

Clothes:

References to clothes and kit, or lack thereof, figured quite frequently in these men's writings. As noted above, the initial issue of both was administered in several stages throughout the period of basic training in England, whereas supplementary battle kit was distributed in the

[299] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 8.10.1918.

[300] W L Fisher, diary entry for 2.9.1917.

base camps in France.[301] Men arrived at the front line as fully clothed and equipped as the state of the army supplies permitted at any given time. Once there, however, distribution of fresh supplies of garments or equipment was severely limited to the annual issue of items for winter wear, and the occasional change of underclothing or shirts. Thus a claim that "your socks were rotted and you never had a change of anything"[302] may be extreme, but it is not necessarily implausible. In other words, within the functional institution the British army had become in the Great War, the cleanliness, clothing and warmth of the individual soldier was basically low on the agenda, and subject to availability.

These conscripts discuss matters of clothing and supplies as an issue reflecting upon their warmth and personal hygiene, and their various attempts to obtain both. One conscript, who arrived in France early in October 1916, kept a daily record of the minutiae of his existence as a combat soldier in France until the armistice of November 1918. Rather than battles, this man was preoccupied with boots and baths, and his diary serves as an excellent survey both of the frequency with which these men received new issues of kit and uniform, and the sources of replacement open to them. He arrived at the front in mid October 1916, and unexpectedly came across a large windfall of supplies in November: "Australians all packing up. They gave me a good pair of puttees, a blanket and a clean pair of socks. Then I got a mackintosh cape, picture postcards, writing paper, books etc. which they left behind."[303] The

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[301] For a description of a soldier's issue of uniform and kit see above section on Basic Training in "Civilian into Soldier."

[302] Rudge, op. cit. p.8.

[303] Acklam, diary entry for 13.11.1916.

next day the army "issued ... new boots, leather jerkin and blanket,"[304] which was the standard winter kit. Two days later he was "marched off for a bath. Got new rigout of everything."[305] Yet apparently there were problems with this issue, since three days later the entire unit "paraded before captain ... to settle the shortage of kit. I got new trench cap and put in for a pair of spurs."[306] Moreover, ten days later he received an "issue of undervest, body belt and gloves"[307] to supplement his winter kit. All these were in his possession until the following May, when "leather jerkins, top boots, undervest and blankets to be handed in now."[308] In July 1917 he received another set of new underclothes,[309] whilst in September he "got new jacket and breeches."[310] Apart from another issue of winter kit in November 1917,[311] this was the extent of new and clean clothing and kit received by this soldier throughout more than two years in France.

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[304] ibid, diary entry for 14.11.1916. These jerkins were "lovely and warm at night -- being lined with woolly material inside." (Thompson, op. cit. letter of 5.11.1918.) Another man claimed that instead of jerkins his unit received "sheep skin coats, so we look like teddy bears." (White, op. cit. letter of 8.11.1916.)

[305] ibid, diary entry for 16.11.1916.

[306] ibid, diary entry for 19.11.1916.

[307] ibid, diary entry for 29.11.1916.

[308] ibid, diary entry for 1.5.1917.

[309] ibid, diary entry for 11.7.1917.

[310] ibid, diary entry for 28.9.1917.

[311] ibid, diary entries for 2.11.1917 ("Got issue of leather jerkins and underpants"), and 4.11.1917 ("issue of top boots.")

Another source of clothing, and occasionally equipment, was in parcels from home, since "we cannot get anything out in this country."[312] The nature of these items, mostly socks, mittens, handkerchiefs, mufflers and even jerseys, points to these conscript's lack of adequate protection against the cold. Thus in thanking his mother for a home-knitted sweater she had sent him one man expressed his needs quite plainly: "It will be most useful on cold nights as I can slip it on over my tunic either for sentry-go, or for sleeping in the open -- it doesn't matter much what you wear out here in the trenches, I wanted some more mittens too as the one pair was quite worn out and I have lost my 'issue' pair."[313] The latter comment highlights the importance these men attached to this source of clothing, since they often specifically requested the items, rather than await the undoubted thoughtfulness and foresight of their families. This letter-writer had already asked for a new pair of mittens two weeks earlier, explaining that they were "rather worn now ... which is not surprising -- considering I have worn them on all sorts of work -- day and night."[314] His second letter was therefore a reminder. Another conscript preferred a pair of woollen gloves since "we get some severe frosts now, [and] they would be better than mittens I think for our job dear."[315] One man received eight pairs of socks after hinting somewhat blatantly to his correspondent: "If you have a pair of isle socks I can put them to extreme use here."[316]

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[312] White, op. cit. letter of 14.10.1916.

[313] Evans, op. cit. letter of 28.12.1916.

[314] idem, letter of 12.12.1916.

[315] White, op. cit. letter of 21.10.1916.

[316] Blore, op. cit. letter of 10.1.1917.

Once clothing or kit was secured in some way, these men were faced with the problems of its preservation and upkeep. On the one hand, the dictates of warfare sometimes meant the loss of equipment. In some cases this was due to official "battle order" which entailed merely the clothes worn by the soldier and a groundsheet "to keep us warm day and night."[317] Whereas in times of great mobility such as the final summer advance of 1918 "overcoats & superfluous kit were dumped & left behind."[318] The evident shortage in kit also provoked men to take the equipment of others, either with or without intent. Thus one conscript recalled losing both his blankets when a friend took them with him to another unit.[319] On the other hand, the prevalent mud of Flanders which clung to everything also ruined clothing and equipment. One section of men, as noted above, resorted to removing a wide strip of material from the bottom of their overcoats, since these got coated in mud and weighed them down.[320] Sewing was also needed for the more mundane task of darning: "Have been trying to mend a pair of socks, but it is hopeless, you could get a brick-end through the holes, so have only now 1 pair left."[321]

In periods of rest behind the lines men also attempted to wash their clothes: "The usual method was to boil ... [the clothes] (whether woollen or otherwise) in a biscuit tin that had been well scrubbed out with a body brush, saddle soap being the cleaning article and creosol

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[317] Abraham, op. cit. p.90.

[318] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 1.9.1918.

[319] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.8.

[320] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.44.

[321] White, op. cit. letter of 15.10.1916.

the disinfectant."[322] This could also be done "in a petrol can with the side cut out."[323] For some, who had traditionally viewed washing as "women's work," this chore was clearly a revelation: "Have been washing today, its about one hour to wash a towel. I will never let a wife of mine do any washing, am using barbed wire for a cloths (sic) line and it seems to perforate the laundry a little."[324] Others, who could both afford it and found themselves in a suitable location, availed themselves of the services of French women who took in washing. Thus one conscript recalled notices announcing "Washing done," in English, in several French villages:

> It was to one of these latter that I took the bundle of dirty clothes that had been accumulating in my Kit Bag since a certain disastrous attempt of my own in which a khaki handkerchief with a bright green pattern played an important part, had decided me against washing my own clothes if it were possible to avoid doing so.
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> The washerwoman asked for a list of the articles and when knowledge of the French word for the various pieces of underclothing failed me she came to my help with the utmost tact.[325]

Besides the dirt of battle and existence in the trenches, men's clothing became filthy simply because it was often upon their bodies for long periods: "Have not had my shirt right off for about six weeks but you cannot help that out here."[326] Within the trenches themselves bathing was usually impossible, since there were no facilities, in addition to references such as "owing to the absence of water were denied the luxury of a wash for that day."[327] When

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[322] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.6.

[323] Jolley, op. cit. p.16.

[324] White, op. cit. letter of 14.10.1916.

[325] Henderson, op. cit. Part 11.

[326] White, op. cit. letter of 28.9.1916.

[327] Adams, op. cit. p.2.

possible, men washed and shaved out of a biscuit tin, a "billy can,"[328] or even "an old 'tin-hat'!"[329] One man wrote of a meeting with a friend in the trenches, in which "we both looked very dirty and unshaven. I haven't washed or shaved since last Satdy (sic)."[330] Another conscript claimed that his days in the support trench were basically preferable to those in the front line trench because he could remove his boots and jacket for sleep, and also because there was water for washing and shaving.[331]

One man suffered a severe attack of diarrhoea "caused by the drinking of water from shell holes and I was forced to discard my braces and use a lanyard instead."[332] In general, bodily necessities in the trenches were catered for either by a latrine bucket or a trench toilet: "This was a narrow trench over which a pole had been executed, being supported at each end by crossed stakes which we secured at the cross by a rope, all very primitive but there were no flush toilets on the Western Front."[333] This man recalled sitting upon such a structure when a German shell exploded fifty yards from him. "I felt the pole shake and down into the trench I went, my back hit the rear of the trench, my feet and legs were in the filth and the seat of my breeches was wet."[334] Unfortunately for him there were no uniform stores in his camp, and he simply had to dry out in his stained clothes.

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[328] Eccles, op. cit. letter of 18.9.1916.

[329] Thompson, op. cit. letter of 12.7.1918.

[330] Bass, op. cit. diary entry for 3.12.1916.

[331] Abraham, op. cit. p.41. He also notes that in the last stages of the 1918 British advance water for personal use other than drinking was stopped. (ibid, p.90.)

[332] Barraclough, op. cit. p.8.

[333] Creek, op. cit. p.47.

[334] ibid.

Thus due to the extreme filth surrounding their existence within the trenches, and often also without, bathing became "one of the few luxuries a soldier gets."[335] Indeed, the most frequent bathing record found in these writings was of a conscript who had five baths in three months.[336] One man, who enjoyed two baths in as many weeks, was moved to comment that "we are certainly having a cushie time here."[337] As with their laundry, bathing was possible for these men usually only in the rest camps, which often incorporated "very rudimentary showers"[338] in their vicinity.[339] These were Divisional baths, to which one man noted a march of ten kilometers,[340] and another recorded a distance of four and a half miles.[341] Yet it was always deemed worthwhile, since bath parades were sometimes also used for the infrequent issue of fresh garments, mostly underclothes, as in the following typical description:

> [Baths were] hastily constructed in say the bottom floor of a warehouse or factory. In one room we had to strip and then run from that room into another (in many cases quite a good distance away and sometimes out of the building altogether and into another). In the second room would be about half-a-dozen sprays and under each spray 2 or 3 men would stand. ... the water ... would be turned on coming cold at first, afterwards getting warm, and on rare occasions hot. ... Soft soap in large buckets was provided for use. After finishing under the spray we should then line up and take our turns at receiving a clean towel and probably shirt and socks, on receipt of which we returned to the dressing room and got dried and got dressed again.[342]

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[335] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.7.

[336] Preston, op. cit. diary entries for 24.6.1917, 3.7.1917, 8.8.1917, 21.8.1917, 5.9.1917.

[337] W L Fisher, op. cit. letter of 25.8.1917.

[338] Jamieson, op. cit. Part II, p.6.

[339] The only alternative form of bathing mentioned in these writings was when three men "lit a fire and had a good bath." (Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 24.2.1918.)

[340] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 4.11.1917.

[341] Harris, op. cit. diary entry for 28.3.1917

[342] Bradbury, op. cit. p.23.

The main shortcoming of these Divisional baths was that "they were always too sparing of water;"[343] thus a shower could last just three minutes,[344] and be "a thin drip of hot water."[345] Another problem was that these baths afforded "no privacy whatever."[346] Indeed, "during the summer, baths would sometimes be erected in a large marquee and we should undress and dress and dress in the field adjoining irrespective of the very close proximity of houses and their inquisitive occupants."[347]

Yet the relative scarcity of bathing moved most men to ignore such problems, as in the case of a conscript who bathed in April 1917: "I had a good bath. What a real luxury first time I had wet my body since November."[348] Another man remembered "the joy of standing in a shed where piping with interspersed [jets] allowed water to refresh & clean us as if we [were] in a shower bath. Alas not often possible to indulge in."[349]

Despite this evident pleasure in bathing, it could also be a painful experience, since "the rough red carbolic soap stung me where the lice had bitten."[350] Lice were an integral part of the soldiers' experiences in France, mostly accepted by them as yet another necessary evil

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[343] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.23. He also claimed that at "the great base-camps they had steam baths, but they were not much in favour with the men, as being an unsatisfactory way of removing dirt." (ibid.)

[344] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.7.

[345] Voigt, op. cit. (1920 edition), p.40.

[346] Jolley, op. cit. p.20.

[347] Bradbury, op. cit. p.23.

[348] Cobb, op. cit. p.9.

[349] Misc. 95, op. cit.

[350] Creek, op. cit. p.39.

of their military existence. Yet unlike mud, dirt, hunger and even enemy fire, all of which could be countered even temporarily, these writings reflect a constant presence of lice, both in and out of the line: "These pests were a continual persecution to us throughout the war, their bites causing much scratching and in some cases blood poisoning."[351] Many men found themselves "lousy as coots"[352] within a few days of their arrival in France. In the base camp at Harfleur "ten to twelve persons in a tent did not afford much room and it was here I made the acquaintance of those little pests which are a nuisance to every soldier in France."[353] In Etaples, another newly arrived conscript spoke to "an 'old hand' [who] made reference to lice and showed disbelief when I expressed ignorance. He suggested I should there and then inspect my underwear which I did and was astonished to find I had a family [of lice]."[354]

But mostly it was on their first journey up to the front line that men became infested: "We slept in a ruined house on the Arras Road and here I became aware of the fact that I was lousy. I began to itch and inspection showed some promising colonies. From then until I went to the R.F.C. [as a photographer] I was never free from them."[355] Men also picked up these vermin in other billets such as barns or schools, where they slept upon straw which often had not been changed for many days. Even within permanent camps lice were rampant, and indeed the subject appeared to be part of soldier's official introduction into camp life: "I was

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[351] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.40.

[352] Rudge, op. cit. p.8.

[353] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.6.

[354] Jamieson, op. cit. Part II, p.6.

[355] Cobb, op. cit. p.7.

given a warning that I would have some difficulty in keeping free from vermin as the straw in the barns was infested with lice. The blankets (grey backs we called them) could not be kept clean & I should purchase a tin of Harrison's Pomade as soon as possible & watch carefully the seams of my shirt for lice etc."[356]

Lice also appeared to thrive within the trenches. One conscript recalled the smoke from a fire lit in a pail "causing many lice ("chats" we called them) to fall from the roof upon us, so that they found refuge in our clothing, and within a few hours multiplied a hundredfold."[357] In addition, during spells in the front line men did not undress, even partially, and thus lice could breed at an even greater rate. Thus it was practically impossible for a soldier to avoid contamination in the trenches, since lice were part of the environment, especially as it was depicted by these soldiers. One man described in disgust a particularly bad trench, listing the mud, lack of rations and overcrowding as evidence of his negative experience; "and to add to that absolutely impossible to be without lice."[358] Another man claimed a certain signaller "gets on my nerves with his perpetual scratching and louse hunting and trying to be so superior to other people."[359] Hence lice were viewed as a negative but unavoidable trait, of humans and trenches alike, on a par with mud, hunger and arrogance.

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[356] Hollingsworth, op. cit. p.8.

[357] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.40.

[358] Clark, op. cit. diary entry for 25.8.1916.

[359] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 23.4.1918.

The breeding habits of these lice[360] rendered futile anything but a thorough course of disinfection, since "hundreds could be laid low and after an hour or so hundreds more could be unavailingly killed. After a time one took little notice of them except when they were feeding."[361] Yet louse hunting, and killing, was a prevalent pastime for many of these soldiers when they were not in the front line, and "it was a daily sight to see one's mates holding their shirts out and killing these tormentors."[362] Another conscript recalled "burning [a] candle along the inner seams of our trousers."[363] But the gravest problems centred around the men's underclothes, which "were made of loosely knit woollen material and I shall always remember seeing the gunners delousing them by candle light; a louse could be winkled out from each hole in the garment and the seams could be singed to kill the nits."[364] Delousing also appeared to form an accepted background to conversation and social interchange. One conscript claimed the reserve line trench latrines "acted as a sort of social centre where we would sit relaxed, swapping gossip and delousing the accessible parts of our clothing. I remember, on one occasion, someone started to count the number of lice caught

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[360] "Free lice are not often found on the skin. The insects remain in the underclothing in contact with the body, except when feeding, and even at such times they may remain attached by the legs to fibres of the cloth. Soon after conception, the mother louse begins to lay eggs, at the rate of five or more a day, and this is kept up for about thirty days. The eggs are then attached to the fibres of the clothing by a sort of cement substance which forms the nit. Hatching occurs at varying periods, according to the temperature. At normal temperature of the human body, hatching may occur in a week, but if repeatedly exposed to cold or kept at a lower temperature, this process may be delayed for over a month." (Hans Zinsser, Rats, Lice and History, (George Routledge & Sons Ltd., 1935), pp. 177-8.)

[361] Cobb, op. cit. p.7.

[362] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.40.

[363] Misc 95, op. cit.

[364] Creek, op. cit. p.38.

and killed and a sort of competition developed. I am not sure whether my count was 103 or 113 ..."[365]

The army authorities recognized the severity of the louse problem, and attempted to countermand it in a number of ways. Thus the aforementioned warning and advice issued to men arriving in the front line. In addition the Divisional baths had "de-lousing tanks that received shirts & vests & blankets tied up in bundles of 10."[366] Steps were also taken against men who were particularly lousy:

> Somebody reported C battery orderly for being covered with lice, so he had to burn his clothes and take all his kit outside. Then after dinner we took all bedding etc. out to air and did the hut out with creosole (sic). The chap's blankets were simply covered with lice in thousands, so the orderly officer ordered them to be burnt.[367]

All these measures were in accordance with a 29 page pamphlet issued by the Royal Army Medical Corps.[368] The bulk of this work is devoted to describing the louse and a series of tests designed to establish the extent of the problem; whilst the last chapter offers recommendations "for a plan of campaign against the pest."[369] It is interesting to note that whereas the educational suggestions were apparently not implemented,[370] most of the practical recommendations for the cleansing of men and uniforms were adopted, albeit often

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[365] Abraham, op. cit. p.41a.

[366] Misc 95, op. cit.

[367] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 13.3.1917.

[368] The Louse Problem at the Western Front, (His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1916). See Appendix IV.

[369] ibid. p.25.

[370] The author suggested the establishment of research and teaching centres in France, attended by soldiers of all ranks. (ibid. pp. 25-6.)

in improvised forms. Thus the physical removal of both lice and eggs from clothing "whenever possible;" and the burning of eggs either with an iron or "a piece of hot metal or a tinder lighter."[371] Unfortunately the writings examined in this dissertation do not refer to the use of powders and disinfectants "every four days" mentioned in another three recommendations. However, the focus of the delousing process suggested in this pamphlet is upon the Divisional Baths. A detailed diagram of the optimal bath-house[372] depicts a structure akin to those described above, apart from the fact that instead of the sheds, huts and adapted warehouses used, baths "should be built and not improvised ... from permanent buildings."[373] After bathing, most of these men did appear to receive a "clean change of underclothing," although none of them mention having their uniform ironed. Tanks for disinfecting clothes were in use, and cresol available as a disinfectant in boiling water even for men who did their own washing.[374] Moreover, "a keen look-out for cases acting as bad lice-carriers" was maintained according to the above case of the lousy orderly.

It was most unfortunate that none of the recommendations pertaining to the cleansing of trenches and billets appeared to have been implemented.[375] No descriptions of disinfecting or scrubbing of billets exist, nor parades for the inspection of lousy men and trenches. Thus even if a soldier made the utmost effort to keep himself and his uniform clean, his attempts were doomed due to the existence of lice everywhere in his surrounding environment. One

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[371] ibid. p.26.

[372] See Appendix IV, p.27.

[373] ibid p.26.

[374] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.6.

[375] Appendix IV, p.28.

man summed up the situation by noting that "even with the new things and a bath I still have plenty of visitors."[376] In other words, absolute cleanliness of body and clothes became practically unattainable, especially in the trenches. A clean soldier issued with clean underclothes was still lousy; a freshly ironed uniform, or even a newly issued one quickly became dirty during a march upon a dusty road or a stint in a muddy trench. More lice were then bred within the uniform which was not removed for some days, drawing more dirt from a body unwashed for some weeks or months. Thus the sanitary experience of these men may be seen as a never ending cycle of filth, redeemed only by occasional partial respites, such as a clean shirt or a bath, which were quickly forgotten.

These conscripts apparently accepted their filthy condition as a necessity for survival, and did so quite quickly. Before entering the line for the first time one young conscript observed a battalion coming out of the section: "We were shocked to see how filthy they looked but it was not long before we were just as scruffy."[377] Yet at the same time they were aware of themselves as unaesthetic human beings. One conscript enjoyed his first bath after seven months, yet "still in spite of this I felt miserably dirty in my clothes and kept to myself to a great extent."[378] Hence his outward appearance came into conflict with his knowledge, and identity, of himself as a clean, tidy and outwardly respectable individual.

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[376] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 16.11.1916.

[377] Abraham, op. cit. p.21.

[378] Cobb, op. cit. p.9.

Chapter Eight: The Institution and War

In this dismal slimy hole where I am working like a mole
See me to relieve my soul A letter
Rats and vermin bite and creep sometimes I almost weep
But what cheers me up when I can't sleep "Your letter" ...[1]

Censorship:

Within the framework of the army it was the issue of censorship which most defined the military identity of the conscript. In a paradoxical manner this institution denied the existence of military experiences in the lives of the conscripts, whilst permanently preserving them as "Soldiers on Active Service" in the eyes of the civilian world. Hence a duality of definition and identity was imposed upon the conscript soldier, in that the military content of his "Active Service" was separated from the human existential content of it. These issues will be discussed at length in the following chapter, "Identity and War." This section will examine the workings of censorship as perceived by the conscripts themselves.

Before reaching the point of censorship, however, it must be noted that letter writing posed other obstacles for some of these men. Firstly, there were those who could not write: "One or two men had asked me to address their cards, and one who had trouble at home asked me to write a letter for him."[2] For those who could write, the second problem was that note

[1] "Sing me to Sleep," possibly composed by F.Dixon of B. Company, 19th Middlesex Regt; cited in: Howes, op. cit.

[2] Creek, op. cit. p.42.

paper and envelopes were somewhat difficult to acquire in France. Thus many men wrote requests such as "some note paper would be very useful when sending, we cannot get any here."[3] This seemed to have been a prevalent problem in the area from the start of the war, as a letter of a young German soldier from October 1914 bears testimony: "Also send stationary often, it's hard to find out here."[4] Besides stationary sent from home, many British conscripts who passed through the larger base camps used the note paper provided by the YMCA huts within them. Sheets torn from notebooks were also used, but overall stationary supplies were a recurring problem for many. It therefore appeared that there were practical restrictions upon the communication between soldier and civilian; as well as the conceptual ones embodied in censorship.

The presence of "The Censor" always loomed large within the conscripts' consciousness. Yet this omnipotent person figured anonymously, even if the letters were actually read by the platoon commander[5] who was usually known to most men. Thus many letters contained phrases such as "that would raise the "censor's" ire;"[6] "on account of the Censor;"[7] "it would not pass the censor."[8] Curiously, even officers who actually censored letters referred to the

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[3] White, op. cit. letter of 24.9.1916; see also for example: Thompson, op. cit. letter of 2.8.1918; Abrey, op. cit. letter of 28.3.1917; Gale, op. cit. letter of 28.7.1916.

[4] Martin Hurvitz, letter of 14.10.1914; (private collection).

[5] The smallest unit in the wartime British army was a section of approximately fifteen men under the command of a lance-corporal. Four sections comprised a platoon commanded by a subaltern. These were the two formations relevant to the fighting conscript.

[6] Eccles, op. cit. letter of 18.9.1916.

[7] Fraser, op. cit. letter of 30.8.1916.

[8] White, op. cit. letter of 4.10.1916.

issue in abstract terms, either as the unknown Censor[9] or as an institution: "censorship gets stricter every day."[10]

The only uncensored mail sent from overseas was a field postcard distributed by the army:

> Each week we were issued a field card which we could complete and send home, these cards were printed and just said "I am well", they just needed signing and addressed; we could write a letter providing we had paper and envelope, but the envelopes were not sealed as the letter was strictly censured (sic). I had sent home a card each week to my mother.[11]

In addition, each soldier received a limited issue of 'green envelopes', "into which a letter may be sealed, unread by the regimental censor. It may be read by the base censor, though every man hopes that his one is not. On the outside is a printed declaration[12] that the letter contains no military information. This must be signed by the sender."[13] The Green envelopes were specifically intended for "the transmission of letters referring to private and family matters only. The writer will sign the certificate on the envelopes as to contents. ... The envelope is large enough to contain several letters, the contents of all of which are covered by the certificate on the outer cover."[14]

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[9] Allfree, op. cit. p.6.

[10] Dale, op. cit. letter of 31.5.1917.

[11] Creek, op. cit. p.42.

[12] The declaration was: "Correspondence in this envelope need not be censored Regimentally. The contents are liable to examination at the Base. The following certificate must be signed by the writer: I certify on my honour that the contents of this envelope refer to nothing but private and family matters."

[13] Henderson, op. cit. ch. 24.

[14] Censorship Orders and Regulations, (Army Document S.S. 660), p.5. The letters in these envelopes were read by the base censors, who were also responsible for the monitoring of morale in the BEF. The latter felt that in reading them, "one is peering into vast depths where one "sees the wheels go round" ... You see and test all the myriad cog-wheels of mentality." (Report on Morale & c. III Army, January 1917). Unfortunately, the only

Green envelopes were comparatively scarce, and thus men treasured them. One conscript recalled a kindly person sending his unit a large crate of cigarettes for Christmas 1917: "Some of mine I exchanged for a "green envelope" in which uncensored letters could be sent home; these did not come my way very often."[15] Many men did not completely understand the green envelope system, despite an explicit explanation printed upon it. Hence many conscripts, like the one quoted above, lived under the misconception that these letters arrived in England completely uncensored. Whereas others were aware of its limitations: "I should love to tell you where I have been -- and am -- but suppose I mustn't, in spite of the fact that I have just been issued with my very first "green envelope"."[16] These uncertainties were probably true of many aspects of censorship, and some conscripts seemed to have adopted a method akin to 'trial and error' in their efforts to communicate explicitly with their family: "Will you also inform me if anything is cut out by the censor, as then I shall know what sort of matter to avoid in future -- at present we are a bit hazy on the subject."[17]

The conscripts perceived of the censor as a barrier between themselves and their civilian connections in a number of ways. Firstly, there was the element of time, or lack thereof, both in the description of events and in the extended period of delivery. Men could not specify the time schedule of their movements about the line or in action, nor could they always write at

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surviving reports based upon these readings are unsuitable for the purposes of this study, due to being compiled on the Italian front, based upon letters from 1916 -- hence just as the conscripts were beginning to arrive in the combat zone. Moreover, there was no reference to the conscripts themselves, but rather to "Tommy" as an average British soldier. The reports are in the collection of Cpt M Hardie, IWM 84/46/1.

[15] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.41.

[16] Evans, op. cit. letter of 12.12.1916.

[17] Tonkyn, op. cit. letter of 10.6.1917.

such times. "You say it seemed ages since you last heard from me, well I always write you whenever I get the chance, of course I can't write when we are in the front lines, and then letters seem to take a long time to come and go."[18] In addition, the despatch of letters was delayed as a result of censorship: "My letters take much longer to reach you than yours do to reach me, I suppose that is on account of the Censor."[19] Indeed, mail sent from England usually arrived within two or three days, whereas censored letters from conscripts in France averaged six days in passage.[20] Letters from England were sorted in London according to units, and then despatched to one of three collection bases in France, Calais, Boulogne and Havre. There mail would be resorted according to current GHQ unit location lists, and then sent on by train to an appropriate railhead. Mailbags would be loaded onto postal lorries attached to each supply column, and taken to the "refilling points" at which all divisions picked up daily supplies. Each division had a field post office, which was responsible for allocating the correct bags of letters to the unit post orderly, who would then take them up the line for distribution. The mail going from the troops to England filtered through exactly the same system -- with the exception of censorship in the unit and later at the base camps.[21] It thus appeared that this element was largely responsible for the delays in despatching mail to England.

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[18] Fraser, op. cit. letter of 17.10.1916.

[19] idem. letter of 30.8.1916.

[20] Calculated on the basis of the following collections of letters that incorporated envelopes stamped by a censor: Hart, op. cit; Thompson, op. cit; Evans, op. cit.

[21] "Behind the Lines 8 -- 'Letters Up'", Stand To: The Journal of the Western Front Association, (1988), p.4.

Secondly, there was the element of place. When the conscripts were in training their address comprised a personal regimental number, unit details and a specific location in England.[22] But soldiers on active service overseas were "not allowed now to put our address, so please keep an old letter of mine dear with it in."[23] "All letters to us [in France] were simply addressed to our name, number and unit, BEF, France, and on the whole the system worked well."[24] This inhibition led to a third issue -- the conscripts' desire to inform family or friends of their whereabouts as a reassurance of their safety. Thus a conscript noted in his diary that they were "not allowed to tell people at home we arrived at Le Havre."[25] Another wrote his wife that "this is considered a very quiet part of the line."[26] Whilst a third made a joke of the entire issue: "I'm not allowed to state that we are in the Somme area and although I'm not 'writing this by the light of bursting shrapnel' still I'm about a twopenny bus ride from the trenches."[27]

One eighteen year old conscript was anxious to inform his parents of his location so they should not worry that he was in Ypres. On the other hand, he wanted them to know he was not being held in reserve until he was nineteen -- "After all I was a front line soldier."[28] Alienation was therefore another result of the inhibition upon specifying a location: despite

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[22] For example: Pte. J.R. Thompson, 26342, "L" Coy, 45th TRB, Camp No. 2, Pertham Down. (Thompson, op. cit.)

[23] White, op. cit. letter of 13/4.10.1916.

[24] Abraham, op. cit. p.45a.

[25] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 29.9.1916.

[26] Evans, op. cit. 12.12.1916.

[27] Blore, op. cit. letter of 10.1.1917.

[28] Abraham, op. cit. p.45.

the theoretical denial of action implied in censorship, the conscripts were partaking in a war that had been raging for at least two years, and with which many civilians were familiar through the press. Most letters examined here contained phrases such as "I believe you know where I am;"[29] which pointed to civilian cognizance with the developments of the war. Thus the conscripts' inability to define their exact location distanced them further from their civilian ties, and frustrated them: "I am at a place you well know but must not mention or you would not get this letter."[30] The closest these men could come to openness was reference to press reports: "... you would know the names of the places from the papers. The Germans were driven out of this village in 1914."[31]

There were various ways in which men attempted to side-step the censor. One conscript placed himself by "enclosing a cutting of a certain advance."[32] Others resorted to clues: "There is a rumour that we are for the land where ice-creams come up in rations, shortly -- compris?"[33] One young conscript even created an elaborate system of codes by which his parents could identify his location:

> Don't forget the method in which I intend to let you know my whereabouts, the letters sloping backwards thus: \ "very" [the first three letters slope to the left] -- VER being the first three letters of Verdun. Also whenever I move and write such a letter containing my whereabouts in detail, I shall sign myself Ted instead of Edgar, so remember.[34]

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[29] Eccles, op. cit. letter of 18.9.1916.

[30] Abrey, op. cit. letter of 30.10.1916.

[31] Evans, op. cit. letter of 12.12.1916.

[32] Eccles, op. cit. letter of 18.9.1916.

[33] Davies, op. cit. 13.1.1918.

[34] Gale, op. cit. letter of 25.7.1916.

This letter was written in England, on the day he embarked for France. Two further letters from the front, written in his proscribed method, were decoded into Etaples, and Somme District, Maricourt and Guillemunt.[35]

The greatest problem presented by censorship, that results from all these inhibitions, was lack of narrative, which is often dependant upon descriptions of time and place. This led to conscripts consciously writing boring letters, since "it's hard to know what to write about as I can't tell you anything or this letter would be destroyed."[36] One man pin-pointed the trap in which the soldier found himself: "I have no news at all as a rule. You see we do the same things day after day and if anything out of the common turns up we probably couldn't tell you about it on account of the censorship."[37] Ultimately, these restrictions upon discussion of time, place and events reduced the conscript experience, as it could be transmitted to a civilian audience, to a vague existence of eating in various climatic conditions:

> With the monotony of the days and the restrictions of the censor it is indeed difficult to find material for filling a page. Anything of the slightest interest is prohibited and one soon says all there is to say about the weather and the food ... When everything else fails there is one formula on which the men here fall back. It runs thus:-
> "Dear Mother,
> I'm all right
> You're all right
> That's all right".
> I am not quite sure whether the last word is not spelt "write".[38]

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[35] idem, letters of 28.7.1916 and 17.8.1916. See Appendix V.

[36] Fraser, op. cit. letter of 20.8.1916.

[37] Hart E A, IWM 82/22/1, letter of 3.9.1917.

[38] Henderson, op. cit. ch. 23.

The closing lines of a letter also followed a set pattern, as one conscript remarked somewhat ironically: "'Hoping this finds you in the pink as it leaves me' (all Tommies conclude thus). Much love..."[39]

The censors, however, had mixed views about the soldiers' letters. An average quota of letters censored by an officer was "fifty letters daily."[40] "Sometimes you can get some amusement from the letters you have to censor especially when a man says shells which fell quarter of a mile or even a mile away were within 100 yards of the battery. Generally they are somewhat monotonous. It is extraordinary how uninteresting other peoples letters can be."[41] Rather than boring, one army chaplain who served as a censor divided them into imaginative and unimaginative epistles:

> One of the funniest jobs I have to do is to censor the letters occasionally. It is perfectly extraordinary how similar and how childish the majority of them are. Some tell most awful stories too. Few of these men seem possessed of any imagination but those who are -- my conscience they do spread themselves out. If you believe about one half of what you hear from letters from the front you may calculate you are right as a rule. We are pretty strict here and if we catch men writing what is obviously untrue we have them up and give them a little beneficial advice. At least it seems to be beneficial for we don't find the offence repeated.[42]

This description shows a lack of comprehension or awareness on behalf of the censor, regarding the inhibitions upon men who did not always have the option of penning creative prose unrelated to real events. In other words, this was a class problem in that censorship exposed the innermost thoughts of all troops, usually of a lower class, to the scrutiny of the

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[39] Blore, op. cit. letter of 10.1.1917.

[40] Dale, op. cit. letter of 31.5.1917.

[41] Letter of 2nd Lt J A Callum, 6th Nov. (no year); in Mrs L Hayman, IWM 88/51/1.

[42] Canon J O Coop, IWM 87/56/1, letter of 13.11.1918.

censoring officer, who was mostly of an upper class. This chaplain viewed the situation with derision, whilst other officers "remembered it as the most valuable experience of ... [the] war because of the 'knowledge of poorer classes' which it gave."[43] Thus Lt. Allfree, who saw action and also censored letters, exhibited an understanding of soldiers inhibited by censorship: "At present I believe Dolly [his wife] has the very haziest idea of what it was like, and this certainly is not her fault as I know my letters, on account of the Censor, never contained anything of the slightest interest."[44] However, the censor as an abstract and anonymous figure unknown to the men was shown to be a fallacy:

> For weeks I used to censor the letters of a certain estimable N.C.O. who wrote a very few lines to his wife -- to whom by the way he was most devoted, I know -- telling her that he had only a minute or two in which to write etc. etc. and sending her his love and so on, and then proceeded to write sheet after sheet to a certain damsel in Kent, in most affectionate terms. More than once Dick and I were tempted to put the letters into the wrong envelopes -- but we never did.[45]

Ultimately the censor was a real barrier between the conscripts' two existences, as soldiers and as civilians. As soldiers they lived through an entire spectrum of experiences which they were prohibited from transmitting back to their civilian lives. Thus more than other elements within the military framework, censorship imposed another identity upon the conscripts simply because they were prohibited from sharing the immediacy of their military experiences with their civilian contacts. Yet the conscripts exhibited a strong and consistent desire to mix their two lives, a fact which points to the perpetuation of a civilian identity. As one of them put

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[43] D. Winter, Death's Men, op. cit. p.164.

[44] Allfree, op. cit. p.6.

[45] Coop, op. cit. letter of 22.2.1916.

it: "I should love to tell you heaps more, but must trust and pray, that some day I may come home and be able to tell you myself."[46]

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Leave:

The importance of home leave within the conscripts' consciousness was immense. As shown above, the eventuality of going on leave from the training camps in England was a strong focal point of their existence. In the trenches this desire, which usually receded into the realms of the abstract, attained the dimensions of "an oasis in the desert."[47] Men were greatly sustained by the possibility of somehow going on home leave, living from rumour to hope that it would happen, and rebuilding hope from each new disappointment. Thus after continuously promising his wife that he would arrive home shortly, one man wrote "Am afraid I shall not get leave this year, but hope to get some before we again get up to the front."[48]

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[46] Evans, op. cit. letter of 12.12.1916.

[47] Adams, op. cit. p.10.

[48] White, op. cit. letter of 1.12.1916.

Denis Winter claimed that in the early part of the war leave from France was seldom granted, but that after 1916 "leave became as well administered as most of the other admin. matters in our war. Lists were kept and a strict rota followed."[49] As an example he noted that in the first two years of fighting in France "Ellison had a typical ration of three leaves in two years, one of four days, another two of ten days each."[50] This quota far exceeded that enjoyed by the conscripts discussed here, since most of them either went on one home leave from the front or not at all: "From Christmas, 1917, I never had a single days leave until I was demobilised in 1919."[51] Leave, like every other organizational aspect of the army, was a function of the developments of war. This did not contradict the establishment of lists and a rota system, but rather diminished their steady enactment. Winter also wrote that compassion "certainly had no part in the process. Fairness and the rota were the only criteria."[52] Yet in this study several references are made to men going on special leave due to illness in the family or other circumstances.[53] As one conscript explained, luck was as important as organization when it came to leave:

> The "leaves" have commenced & Jimmy Rourke is the first to go. Of course us newcomers are at the bottom of the list but it seems our turn will come in about 9 months time if we are lucky.[54]

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[49] Death's Men, op. cit. p.166.

[50] ibid. p.165.

[51] Abraham, op. cit. p.21.

[52] Death's Men, op. cit. p.166.

[53] See for example: Jolley, op. cit. p.44, p.47; Bishop, op. cit. diary entry for 17.8.1917.

[54] Jolley, op. cit. p.22.

Conscripts knew that in theory army regulation entitled them to seven days leave every six months[55], much as they knew that their chances of actually receiving it were slim: "I hope I shall get my leave before we go [up the line again]. I expect it will be knocked on the head altogether, if I don't. I wish the day's would pass a little more quickly for that leave seems a long time coming doesn't it?"[56] As with every other aspect of the conscripts' future movements, this issue was also shrouded in mystery, and hence germinated many stories: "Rumours of the Division going home on leave and then going to India."[57]

Leave was so important to these men that they would do much to gain it. One conscript recalled spending an "exciting evening looking for two German prisoners as capture means a months leave."[58] Another man, who did not usually care too much about army regulations, claimed he returned two Prussian bayonets he had kept as souvenirs:

> We had orders that we were not to bring anything at all in the way of souvenirs -- we were going to have ten days leave and I thought "Well, I don't want to lose my leave", so I puts them down and the chap behind me picks them up and he gets through -- and he went through with them. That was just the luck -- and I should like to have kept them but, you see, ten days leave was worth more than that -- (after all that time, we had no leave in 13 months).[59]

On the whole, these conscripts never relinquished their desire for leave. As one of them put it, the soldier always "lays claim with unfailing persistence ... [to] his rations, his pay, and his 'leave'."[60] Yet at the same time they identified the established hierarchial system of the

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[55] Abraham, op. cit. p.21.

[56] Davies, op. cit. letter of 13.1.1918.

[57] Bishop, op. cit. diary entry for 20.8.1917.

[58] Bishop, op. cit. diary entry for 30.6.1917.

[59] Rudge, op. cit. p.17.

[60] Henderson, op. cit. Part 39.

army working against them: "Major fired a lot of rounds today. He has got a months' leave and we can't get a day."[61] This insight is borne out by the observation of a conscripted junior officer, who found himself similarly confronted with the system:

> Bob is home on leave. How he worked it I don't know. I am digging myself well in with my C.O. by dint mainly of being a good listener to his stories of Simla in the year one; but even then I don't see much prospect of leave before December -- and before then we might be in some push or other one never knows.[62]

Notice of leave was usually given unexpectedly, and implemented immediately:

> We had been waiting for seventeen months when, without warning, a leave allotment was assigned to our unit. About half a dozen men were going every day and no one knew whose turn would come next. We were full of intense excitement and glad expectation, but also of anxiety in case something should happen to stop our leave altogether.[63]

Another man recalled that "one evening there was brought to me the very pleasant information that I should pack up and be ready to go back to [the] depot with the ration limbers ... [once there] I spent some hours removing all traces of mud, had a shower-bath, and polished my buttons and waited."[64] Indeed, when possible the men made every effort to make themselves physically presentable for civilian eyes. One conscript recalled a pal going on leave borrowing one man's tunic, and "Bob's leggings and Harry's British warmer and Tom's puttees. This guy's going to make a splash in London, I can tell you."[65]

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[61] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 30.12.1917.

[62] Lt Dale, op. cit. letter of 10.8.1917.

[63] Voigt, Combed Out, op. cit. (1929 edition), p.180.

[64] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.47.

[65] Henderson, op. cit. Part 48.

The journey across France to England often involved all forms of transportation, and since these were invariably slow a certain part of the leave was wasted. One conscript recalled that starting "from La-Gorie station I travelled to Bethune by a light railway and from there proceeded via cattle trucks to Boulogne, this distance being covered in 2 days. On the following day we set sail for Folkestone at 9 A.M. arriving at 11 A.M. from whence we entrained for Victoria reaching this destination at 3 P.M."[66] Another man travelled for a day and a half by train to Havre, where he embarked upon a waiting vessel at 4 pm.

> We went downstairs and finding a nice spot very soon fell asleep on the floor of a passage where we remained oblivious of everything until awakened about five o'clock next morning. Our first enquiry naturally was "Where are we" but much to our disappointment we received the reply that we were still in the Harbour at HAVRE.[67]

After a further delay of twelve hours, during which the troops disembarked and had "a sing-song,"[68] the ship finally sailed to England.

The conscripts' experiences on leave were rarely documented in these writings, probably because they quickly reverted to their civilian identity and hence felt this period to be removed from their military experience.[69] Typically, leave is summarized into a few sentences, if at all: "I need not enter here into the happiness of the days I spent on leave. Every moment was one of joy and each of the 15 days was like a day in heaven."[70] One conscript, who kept a very detailed diary in France, went on leave after two years at the front.

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[66] Adams, op. cit. p.9.

[67] Bradbury, op. cit. p.53.

[68] ibid.

[69] For a full discussion of this issue see below chapter 9, "Identity and War."

[70] Bradbury, op. cit. p.54.

His entries for the period of leave are minimal, often skipping two or three days at a time.[71] For many men the initial contact with the English civilians was shocking, in that it starkly contrasted the existence both populations had become accustomed to in the conscripts' period of absence. Thus one man recalled arriving in Victoria station during a German bombing in January 1918. He entered the underground and boarded a train which was "full of scared women and children who did not realise how safe they were in such deep tunnels. As we passed by some exclaimed "Poor boys!" Little did they know our true feelings."[72] Since their experiences whilst on leave are not discussed, it is difficult to establish from these writings to what extent, if any, these conscripts did actually voice their true feelings. The only explicit reference made to this issue was by a young conscript who arrived home on his first leave just after the armistice of 1918. When questioned by his father he found himself unable to discuss his experiences in full, since "I was young and confused about man's inhumanity to man. I did say it was bloody horrible and I told him I had seen a trench full of parts of American soldiers which had been blown to pieces."[73]

The return to France and to their military existence appears to have been traumatic for many conscripts: "The scene at the station was indescribable; thousands of people were there to see their husbands, sons, sweethearts, and friends off ... it was indeed an effort ... to keep from breaking down."[74] The trains were "full of soldiers returning from leave and apparently all were feeling like myself, fed up as not a word was spoken on the journey each being

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[71] Acklam, op. cit.

[72] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.47.

[73] Creek, op. cit. p.56.

[74] Bradbury, op. cit. p.54.

engrossed with his own thoughts."[75] It is difficult to gauge these thoughts precisely, but they probably summarised the short civilian interlude of leave: "These delightful experiences which seemed like an oasis in the desert and to which I had been looking forward to so eagerly, came to an end all too quickly and ... I had to return to France with a heavy heart."[76] And upon reaching their camps, most men simply embarked upon another flight of fantasy about "the next leave -- it might come in eight or nine months -- that was something to look forward to and I began to think of all the things I would do then. Nothing seemed to matter save my next leave."[77]

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Pay:

Money, in the form of weekly pay, was another sphere in which civilian and military spheres overlapped, both practically and conceptually. A private soldier was entitled to one shilling per day, payable on a weekly basis. Half of this sum could be sent directly to his family as an allowance, leaving the soldier with three shillings and sixpence per week. Money sent from home, in the form of postal orders, was the only other major source of funds for most of these soldiers; and one which was not really available to most.

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[75] Jolley, op. cit. p.47.

[76] Adams, op. cit. p.10.

[77] Voigt, op. cit. p.196.

In theory an individual's conscription was a form of trade in which he gave himself as a soldier, whilst in return the state became responsible for every aspect of his existence. Thus the purpose of money as income in the conscripts' civilian life was supposedly void, since they were clothed, housed and fed at the state's expense. But this reasoning proved itself to be flawed. As shown above, the army supplied three meals a day, and no more. A conscript who suffered hunger at other times had to feed himself, at his own expense. This could be done either by scrounging, or with the help of food parcels or postal orders from home, or at a local cafe or a YMCA canteen. Moreover, the individual was left to his own resources when faced with the need for any item that was not strictly army issue, such as paper and envelopes, a pencil, extra socks or books. All of these, however, were subject to availability, since purchasing or spending was limited to those times in which the conscripts were behind the lines, hence in the vicinity of base camps or French vendors.

One aspect of these conscripts' perception of money in France was the currency itself. Most of them had never ventured abroad before, nor had they any cognizance of monetary units beyond pounds shillings and pence. Hence their presence in a foreign land was an initiation into the concept of exchange rates and the different purchasing power of each currency:

> It was at one of these [YMCA huts] I first had French money exchanged for English which was favourable to us our money being worth more than the French, that is to say the silver, as the copper coins passed as the same as the French. Calling for a mug of tea and a rock cake value 2.5d & tendering a shilling to my surprise I received a silver coin similar in size to a shilling & also a penny as well. This I found was because a shilling was worth 1 franc 35 centimes.[78]

Another conscript noted a rate which was quite similar, when he received 13.95 French Francs in exchange for ten shillings. Yet adapting to the notion of two different currencies could be

[78] Jolley, op. cit. pp. 6-7.

difficult, and often took time. One conscript wrote home after a month in France that "[I] haven't quite got into relation between French & English money."[79] Whilst another man remarked upon the preference of vendors in the camps for large notes of currency that could be easily exchanged: "For instance you can get a box of cigarettes for 11d if you give them a shilling, but if you offer a 6d and coppers it costs you 1/1."[80]

On a practical level these soldiers therefore needed money for supplementary rather than existential purposes. Supplementary, however, appears to have been a relative term. Those who had only their army pay as an income existed upon military fare, with the occasional binge on wine or food on the rare occasions in which these were available: "Once Tommy has a pay day, he usually spends it where he has the chance, as any day, any time may mean a removal."[81] Thus when pay and chance collided, the former was usually quickly dispensed with: "Paid today so went out to spend some after tea."[82] Others, who had recourse to private funds, deemed supplementary as necessary: "Thanking you again for your [5 shilling] postal order which has helped to buy one or two necessities such as some food [and] a little chocolate which comes in very nice out here."[83] Overall, however, these conscripts were

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[79] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 15.8.1917.

[80] Gale, op. cit. letter of 28.7.1916.

[81] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.5.

[82] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 9.2.1918.

[83] Abrey, op. cit. letter of 28.3.1917. This conscript received postal orders from his sister quite regularly, and his thank you letters always included references to the money being used for the purchase of "necessities". (Abrey, passim.)

dependant upon the army, both for money and upkeep: "We were paid this morning ... which came very acceptable as we were all broke."[84]

When viewed in this context of "pocket money", army pay, which in France was distributed every two weeks,[85] was deemed inadequate by the conscripts discussed here:

> Grub is absolutely rotten here, easily the worst I have experienced. A little bit of bread dished out in the evening to last all next day. You take your chance of getting anything to go with it. To make matters worse I am running short of funds ... & no prospect of getting more -- pay comes in fits & starts out here.[86]

Lack of payment on a systematic basis was the biggest problem experienced by soldiers on active service. Whilst in the training camps in England the conscripts were paid once a week, in a formal parade.[87] But the "method of payment in the Army in France is very erratic and sometimes we were a month without pay. This goes rather hard."[88] Indeed, lack of money in the front line was not a practical problem since nothing could be bought. Yet the feeling of hardship still prevailed, since these funds were officially owed to the men. Hence beyond the practical purchasing power of money, pay was also largely a measure of an individual's worth, which gave him with a sense of independence. As one man put it, "sometimes you had to wait a month for it [pay] -- you'd never got no money. There was nowhere to spend it but we used to gamble it."[89]

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[84] Jolley, op. cit. p.16.

[85] Voigt, op. cit. (1920 edition), p.110.

[86] W L Fisher, op. cit. letter of 24.8.1917.

[87] See above chapter 5, "Basic Training."

[88] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.5.

[89] Rudge, op. cit. p.23.

A duality of consciousness thus emerged. On the one hand these soldiers were aware that their upkeep and existence in the front line was totally dependant upon their external identity as soldiers in the British army. On the other hand, their cognizance of a work ethic rewarded by monetary payment in the civilian world, regardless of the circumstances, instilled within them a feeling of rights denied. Rights, however, belonged to those who worked for a living, and not to those who received pocket money. Hence despite the small sum, one may surmise that these conscripts still viewed their pay as wages given in exchange for a job of work. In other words, the conscripts still saw themselves as working men, employed by the army for a specific job, at an unsatisfactory rate of pay: "We got no bonus, boot money, danger money, dirty money or any other sops now expected by the average working man."[90]

In relation to money, these conscripts' identity as soldiers was that of workers in uniform, whose job description was that of fighting. This is emphasised by the following diary entry:

> Major says we get no pay till he finds out who made a hole in a water trough the officers pinched from the men, so there is a general opinion of 'no pay, no work'.[91]

Whilst deduction of pay was a known military disciplinary measure,[92] it is interesting to note that here it is interpreted by the men within the context of a civilian work-place. The major, by denying the men pay as a form of sanction, clearly assumed the mantle of employer in their eyes, thus enabling them to respond as employees in an industrial dispute. This

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[90] Abraham, op. cit. p.17.

[91] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 9.7.1917.

[92] For example, the mother of a conscript was informed by an official form designed for the purpose that her son had received 14 days No.1 Field Punishment (in which he had been kept in the open air under a corrugated roof), in addition to two weeks pay being deducted from his army wages. His offence was not specified. (Eccles, op. cit.)

imposition of civilian ethos upon their military existence was crucial to these conscripts' perception of discipline, and ultimately their identity in the army.

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To drop your rifle on foot of Second Lt.
is bad luck -- for him.
To drop ditto on foot of Sergeant Major
is bad luck -- for you.[93]

Discipline:

Discipline is central to the concept of an army as an overtly hierarchial institution engaged in the deployment of organized violence. The character of each army is often determined by the emphases laid upon different aspects of discipline, since officer-man relations, esprit des corps and morale are directly affected by it. As shown above in the chapter on training, discipline instills the acceptance of a hierarchy and unquestioned obedience within the military unit, alongside the revelation of violence without. In this sense, the

> chief function of the disciplinary power is to 'train', rather than to select and to levy; or, no doubt, to train in order to levy and select all the more. It does not link forces together in order to reduce them; it seeks to bind them together in such a way as to multiply and use them.[94]

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[93] From a comic list of soldiers' superstitions, in Bass, op. cit. back cover of diary for 1918.

[94] Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, (Penguin: Peregrine, 1979), p.170.

Taking this principle to extremes, one could say that the ultimate role of military discipline is the creation of a robot who obeys all orders docilely behind the lines, yet roars into tremendous displays of aggression when sent into action.[95]

But the conscripts were not robots; they were men who arrived in the army with civilian values of behaviour, which were supposedly made invalid by the discipline of the military framework. Many aspects of their army experiences were basically human and existential, such as food, effects of weather and mud, or even marching -- in that it was a form of physical exertion. Hence it was actually human and civilian expectations with which the individual conscript confronted the military framework. But discipline was a sphere in which two sets of values, military and civilian, could come into open conflict. Unfortunately, there is no human or existential level to this aspect of the army, which is designed to eliminate any semblance of individuality or character:

> What is a 'crime' in a soldier is usually a pardonable eccentricity in a civilian -- and what is regarded as a good military quality is usually one which would stamp a civilian as being socially impossible. The army therefore being based on an immoral hypothesis -- viz war -- is simply an inversion of moral codes.[96]

An examination of these conscripts' perception of discipline in the army in which they served is central to the search for their identity. Since a soldier, even one conscripted, accepts discipline as a tenet of army life, the focus of this discussion is not upon the entire

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[95] On the role of discipline in the training of soldiers and the characterization of armies, see for example: N. Dixon, On the Psychology of Military Incompetence, op. cit. Part Two; R. Holmes, Firing Line, op. cit. ch.8. On discipline and capital court martials in the British Expeditionary Force in the Great War, see for example: Anthony Babington, For the Sake of Example, (Paladin, London, 1986); Englander & Osborne, "The Armed Forces and the Working Class", op. cit.

[96] Blore, op. cit. letter of 29.1.1917.

disciplinary framework of the British Expeditionary Force. Rather, it is an investigation of those elements within it that came into conflict with these conscripts' civilian values, and hence identity, which survived throughout their military career.

The most informative insight into the these men's perceptions of military discipline was written by a conscripted school teacher, who devoted an entire chapter of his lengthy account to the issue:

> The discipline in the army is maintained by threats. On this fact I make no criticism: I merely state it. "You refuse to obey my order. Very well. Fall in two men and march him off to the guard room" "Do this at once or I'll bring you up before the officer tomorrow". Yes, that expresses the attitude better than anything else. "Do this or ---".[97]

In other words, discipline was seen in the strictest sense of obedience and disobedience, isolated from other considerations such as comprehension, compassion or even morale. An order given by a person of a higher rank, thus better placed than a conscripted private within the hierarchy, was to be obeyed -- regardless of the circumstances. This perception was borne out in the writings of these men in several ways. One conscript, who was interviewed in an oral history project, recalled that "we was never allowed ... to take a photograph. If they caught you with a camera, they'd damn well shoot you. That's what they used to threaten us, anyway."[98] Most commonly conscripts were threatened with various punishments due to sloppy appearance, such as hair of an unmilitary length or unpolished boots:

> Every man must shave once in twenty four hours. Buttons ... cap badges and numerals must be cleaned thoroughly once a day. Box-respirators and steel helmets will always be carried. Except when it is raining, great-coats or waterproofs will not be worn when

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[97] Henderson, op. cit. part 43.

[98] Rudge, op. cit. p.8.

men are working. ... Unless there is an improvement in future the coompany (sic) will parade each evening at 5.30 and on Sunday afternoon for extra drill.[99]

Threats were also carried out, especially if the superiors responsible felt their authority was not absolute. In other words, bullying through threats and punishments was the method used, mostly by NCO's, to keep an awareness of the hierarchy within the army, and the conscripts' lowly place within it: "[The NCO] was bullied by his superiors just as we were bullied by ours. He was bullied into being a bully. And his superiors were bullied by their superiors. The army is ruled by fear -- and it is this constant fear that brutalizes men not naturally brutal."[100] Bullying could be done in a number of ways, as in the issue of pointless orders which, if unfulfilled, left the soldier open to punishment: "I remember ... one corporal in particular, who seemed almost to take a delight in issuing useless orders. That man is the only man in the army for whom I have felt anything like hate."[101] The following sequence of diary entries highlighted another method of bullying, whence disciplinary measures, which ultimately affected the private soldier most, were used as a tool within a power struggle between officer and NCO:

18.2.1917	Carter, Lock and Bdr. Anchers were late for O.P. this a.m. and are under arrest.
19.2.1917	Carter and party up before major who reprimanded them.
20.2.1917	Sgt. Petty got up in a bad temper and put Carter under arrest because he was not washed and ready for duty by 8 a.m. prompt. He was remanded for Colonel.

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[99] F A Voigt, Combed Out, (1920 edition), p.19. See also: Acklam, op. cit. diary entries for 24.1.1917, 9.2.1917 and passim; Hale, op. cit. p.53 and passim.

[100] Combed Out, (1920 edition), p.20.

[101] Henderson, op. cit. part 43.

21.2.1917 Carter got five days No.2 [punishment] and sent down to Wagon Line.[102]

The most common cause of resentment and feeling of hardship aroused within these men was the absence of explanation and reasoning. "There is, in the army, a feeling that an order for which the reason is explained tends to slacken discipline. Men must learn to do things because they are told to do them not because there is a good reason for doing them.

> "Do it because I tell you to do it."
> "Never you mind why: remember you're speaking to an N.C.O. and get on with the job".
> "It doesn't matter whether there is a better way of doing it. I'm orderly sergeant and I've given you an order".

These are typical of much that goes by the name of discipline."[103] One conscript wrote of a solo balloon ascent he attempted whilst on training, in which he nearly crashed due to circumstances beyond his control: "The crowning insult was hurled at me the following day by the C.O. who designated me "an insolent young puppy" for expressing my opinion of the ascent in my balloon report, as "extremely unwise" -- that is one of the reasons I dislike the army. Of course I wasn't allowed the luxury of a protest and had perforce to "turn about" from the presence of the "all highest"."[104] Another conscript, who was in the line, noted that "two men were nearly arrested for answering back."[105] One gunner recalled an inspection held by a new Regimental Sergeant Major, who discovered that all the men in his unit had

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[102] Acklam, op. cit. Field punishment number two "meant a note in the pay book, pay forfeit, sleeping under guard and the performance of such fatigues and pack drills as could be crammed into the day. All the while the offender would be on a diet of water and biscuit. Worse, he would not be allowed to smoke." (D. Winter, op. cit. p.43.)

[103] Henderson, op. cit. part 43.

[104] Blore, op. cit. letter of 28.10.1916.

[105] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry of 30.1.1917.

removed the heavy ammunition from their bandoliers, and had then padded them out with paper:

> Consequently he reported us all to the Colonel as the most slovenly and ill equipped squad he had ever inspected. The old Colonel was awfully decent about it and lectured us in a kindly way reminding us ... what a terrible predicament we should be in should trouble arise & we find ourselves without ammunition. As however we were not carrying rifles I am afraid we failed to appreciate carrying a bandolier ... [with] 28 lbs of "ammo" while we had nothing to fire it with. Still it was not our place to argue the point.[106]

Conscripts, or any other British soldier, rarely argued with their superiors; yet these men abstained out of considerations which were of a civilian rather than a military nature. This was the approach they adopted whenever faced with the issue of discipline, including the various aspects discussed below. Moreover, it was this attitude which ultimately shaped their identity in the eyes of others in the army -- who apparently persisted in a view that the conscripts were an alien, and dangerous civilian element. "... both junior officers and the [regular and voluntary] rank and file [were] seemingly unite in their suspicions of the conscripts, [and] it is hardly surprising that such fears were also prevalent at higher levels. ... Major-General Sir Wyndham Childs, who as Deputy Adjutant-General and then Director of Personal Services in the War Office from 1916 to 1919 had dealt with disciplinary matters, was in no doubt that after the war that crime in the army and especially desertion was more prevalent after the introduction of conscription."[107]

In fact, only one case of desertion was mentioned in these writings, and it occurred in England. On the train to Southampton Alfred hale recalled "the voice of the Sergeant-Major

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[106] Jolley, op. cit. pp. 39-40.

[107] I F W Beckett, "The Real Unknown Army", op. cit. p.4.

calling out that no one was to leave the train under threat of dire penalties. But this did not prevent Ist A-M Matthews, who all along had said that he would not proceed overseas whether ordered to or not, from leaving the train and the squadron altogether; deserting in fact."[108] Warnings issued by the army authorities in face of the possibilities of deserting and the expected punishment are noted twice. The first occurrence was also in England, whence troops were stationed in Woolwich for two days prior to embarkation to France: "Am now warned not to leave barracks as absence from roll call means liable to be tried by District Court Martial."[109] Another conscript, who had fought in the infamous Polygon Wood, where much blood had been shed by both sides, recalled that on the night prior to his departure from this site "an officer had read us a warning concerning the penalties of deserting. This was the only time we ever heard this warning."[110]

Within the spectrum of military disciplinary devices, death was the ultimate penalty hovering over the men.[111] It was a permanent fixture in their lives because the basic purpose of an individual's conscription into the army was to fight; refusal to do so was cause for his death.

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[108] Hale, op. cit. p.131.

[109] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry 29.9.1916.

[110] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.12.

[111] The offenses punishable by death during the Great War "included mutiny, cowardice before the enemy, disobedience of a lawful order, desertion or attempted desertion, sleeping or being drunk on post, striking a superior officer, casting away arms or ammunition in the presence of the enemy, leaving a post without orders, abandoning a position, and treacherously communicating with or in any way assisting the enemy." (Babington, op. cit. p.4.) From the outbreak of the war to the end of March 1920 "3,080 men had been condemned to death and 346 of the, 11.23 per cent, had been executed." (ibid. p.245, quoting from the Statistics of the Military Effort, op. cit., Part XXIII - Discipline.)

Hence a combat soldier was caught within a paradox, since both fighting and an abstention from it, for whatever reason, could lead to his death:

> I've seen them when they was drove over the top. If they didn't go they was shot. They used to count down (to zero) and then "Over the top" and then the Military Police would come along and see that they had all gone over.
> Q. And what happened if anybody decided they weren't going to get out of the trenches?
> A. Oh well, they shot 'em.[112]

Once a soldier went over the top the death threat was not eliminated, since he could refuse to proceed and fight. One conscript who was promoted to the status of NCO recalled his personal dilemma during an attack in which "there was sufficient light from bursting shells to enable me to see one of our men running back ... I believe we NCO's were supposed to shoot any man we saw running away from action but in the vast confusion of battle, even in daylight, how could one be sure?"[113]

A refusal to fight was not the only crime punishable by death, though it was the most frightening simply because it did not necessitate a court martial.[114] Two court martials are mentioned in the writings examined here.[115] In the first, which took place in a training camp

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[112] Rudge, op. cit. pp. 19-21.

[113] Abraham, op. cit. p.105.

[114] There is no data on the number of men, conscripts or others, who were shot in this manner; whilst "the recent study of capital courts martial appears to identify only nine conscripts out of 343 other ranks [throughout the war] as having suffered the supreme penalty although the data is not provided in sufficient detail to enable more than a rough estimate to be deduced." (I. Beckett, "The Real Unknown Army",op. cit. p.10.) The sentences were carried out "in a secluded place with men of their own unit as witness. Twelve men chosen at random would be issued with a mixed live and dummy dozen of bullets to ease their consciences. Each death was reported simply as a casualty on active service." (D. Winter, op. cit. p.43.)

[115] There was a huge increase in the Number of court martials held throughout the war: In 1913 3,690 cases were heard; whereas between 1914-1918 252,773 cases were tried -- an

on Salisbury Plain, a conscript was put on trial for striking a NCO who had cheated in a card game. After being held for several days in the guard room he was marched to a tribunal,[116] where he was asked if he had hit the NCO:

> I could only answer yes. I did have one officer defending me and I remember him saying something about extenuating circumstances. The sergeant in charge of my escort was told to take me outside and wait; but it was not long before I was back inside to hear the president of the court say "you have committed a serious offence, the court finds you guilty, your punishment is sixty days in H.M. military prison.[117]

In the second instance a soldier was found asleep whilst on guard duty in the front line. This offence was indeed punishable by death under any circumstances. His NCO, however, pleaded on his behalf, claiming that due to a bout of influenza the company was short of men, hence the fit ones were on duty all night in addition to a rotation of two hours on and off during the day.[118] The sentence passed on the guard was one of death commuted, and due to the Army Suspension of Sentences Act (1915)[119] was served by him during the periods in which the company was out of the front line.[120]

A soldier was army property, hence any attempt to "damage" him was also punishable by court martial. Throughout the war, with a marked increase after the Somme campaign of

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average of 160 per day. (Brent-Wilson, op. cit. p.52.)

[116] A tribunal was composed of a major, captain and lieutenant. The prisoner was prosecuted by his own adjutant, and defended by a company officer.

[117] Creek, op. cit. p.33.

[118] Men on guard duty were usually given several hours of rest the next day.

[119] The Act "fulfilled the basic tenet of military law in that the penalty did nothing to precipitate a man-power shortage. In consequence, an offender might remain on active service despite conviction, the army reserving the right to acquit or impose sentence at will." (Englander & Osborne, op. cit. p.598.)

[120] Abraham, op. cit. p.55.

August 1916, four thousand men were charged with causing a self-inflicted wound.[121] Thus a chaplain attached to a front line unit wrote of a case in which a man was put "under arrest for having tried to injure himself and will probably get two years for it."[122] The conscripts were aware of their status as property, which was another cause for resentment. One young conscript, noted above, was thankful for missing a rat poised on the tip of his boot which he attempted to stab, since he could have been court martialled for "self inflicted wound."[123] To an extent, army discipline had thus instilled in this man a sense that as an individual his life was worth less than that of a rat; in addition to a thorough understanding of the negative implications of a court martial.

One conscript recalled an amusing incident in which a court martial was narrowly averted. In his account, he also reveals the latent attitude of these conscripts to the disciplinary framework in which they found themselves. A somewhat pompous young officer arrived in the front line directly after his training in England. Appalled by what he deemed as lack of discipline amongst the troops, he attempted to enforce the "King's regulations. These are all very well in a training camp but some are out of place in the front line."[124] Having got drunk one night he decided to make the men more alert in case of spies, by lining them up and disarming them. Standing in front of a well-built Irishman, who was a building labourer in civilian life, the officer addressed him:

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[121] Brent-Wilson, op. cit. p.59.

[122] Coop, op. cit. letter of 3.10.1915.

[123] Abraham, op. cit. p.62.

[124] Hall, op. cit. p.10.

> Now, I'm a German spy and you are all quite defenceless." Mike said "Am I, begorrah!" and laid him out flat in the mud of the trench with a straight right. The corporal, after helping him to his feet, had to explain that if he tried to court martial Mike for hitting an officer he would lay himself open to the charge of disarming his men in face of the enemy. After this incident Mike was heard to remark that "I've been wanting to do that for weeks but I never thought that he would give me such a wonderful excuse for doing it.[125]

Several men mention guard duty as a focal point of discipline, basically because it was a regular fixture in their lives, in addition to their other duties. Thus a human need for sleep often came into conflict with the military need to mount a guard; but military discipline considered the latter as foremost. One man, who was struck by the Spanish Influenza epidemic that ravaged Europe in the summer of 1918, remained the sole survivor of a signal section which was sent up the line. Arriving at his post, "I lay down on a mattress in the cellar of a ruined farmhouse, checked that all my telephone connections were in order and knew nothing more until I was rudely shaken by the company commander who asked me if I knew that, for a soldier on duty sleeping at his post, the sentence was death. I explained my condition which he apparently understood and that was the end of it and my Spanish 'flu."[126] Another conscript recorded a more common occurrence of sleeping on duty:

> While I was on [night] duty about 11 o/c I saw someone standing not far away whom I took to be one of the wheelwrights as their bivvy was close by so did not challenge him. All of a sudden it dawned on me it was an officer so I at once challenged him & found to my dismay it was the Captain. "So this is how you keep guard is it," he said ... "Call out the guard" said he. This was a fine predicament as I knew they were all fast asleep in their bivvies ... I told him I thought that as it was a wet night & we had no guard tents that the NCO had let them go to their bivvies ... The next morning the NCO got a lecture from the Captain but nothing worse.[127]

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[125] ibid. p.11.

[126] Jamieson, op. cit. Part 2, p.5.

[127] Jolley, op. cit. p.26.

There were usually six soldiers on each night guard duty rota, thus two men for each watch. One conscript recalled a lightening German raid in which one sentry was stunned by a blow over his head, whilst his partner was seized from their post in the middle of the night. "Next day all remaining five men were sent out for court-martial, and eventually discharged; the captain and colonel were suspended for some time after this affair."[128] Following this incident the company went out for a week's rest behind the lines; however "we had no rest whatever ... for the authorities seemed to be bent upon punishing us all for losing that man. Our company had to work all day doing odd jobs ... we were glad to push off again to the [front] line."[129]

This case highlighted three aspects of military discipline which were important to the conscripts discussed here. Firstly, their perception of "the authorities" as a vague and threatening power, above themselves as private soldiers. In other words, discipline was here understood as the underlying force of the hierarchy, in which their own place was exceedingly low. Secondly, that in rest periods discipline was not relaxed; rather the contrary was true. In this case the company was obviously being punished with extra duties, but units often resumed a regime of drill and parades whilst out on rest.[130] Hence discipline was perceived as the tool used by the "authorities" in any attempt to revert the army to its pre-war more rigid structure, since discipline in the front line was influenced more by the dictates of war rather than principle. The commuted death sentence noted above was another example of this

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[128] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.44.

[129] ibid. pp. 45-6.

[130] Copson, op. cit. p.6. This issue will be discussed in the following chapter, "Identity and War", which focuses upon the conscripts perception of the army's organization.

situation: Whilst in the line a soldier was expected to fight and to keep alive; whereas behind the lines he could be subject to disciplinary dictates.

The third aspect of discipline apparent here was the concept of collective punishment, for offenses committed both by superiors and by the men within their own ranks. In the incident described above the entire company was punished for the loss of one man; this in addition to the individual punishments meted out to those who were directly involved and responsible. This established a double principle of responsibility, which meant that firstly, each man was responsible for the perceived offenses of himself, his fellow soldiers, and his superiors. Thus one conscript noted in his diary that the "Skipper [was] disgusted with battery staff yesterday, so gave us a cross-country run as punishment ... When we got back he sent us over the jumps. I had a job getting mine [horse] over but eventually did."[131] Secondly, with no exception, there always had to be someone responsible for a perceived offence; as, for example, in the following occurence:

> I saw a grenade accident where the sergeant technically responsible was court martialled and demoted. While the responsibility was his in theory, supervision under battle field conditions was almost impossible and the undiscriminating response of the army did not give us a good opinion of staff sense since he was a good man & we did not like to see him broken in this way.[132]

This description reflects upon the other side of collectivity, in which the men felt themselves as one in opposition to their superiors. The group spirit appeared to instill a measure of strength within the individuals, alongside a sense of justice -- punishment for an offence committed by everyone was more acceptable than punishment suffered by all for the offence

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[131] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 30.1.1918.

[132] Hall, op. cit. p.4.

of one. This contrast between the weakness of the individual and the strength of the group was highlighted in the account of one young conscript, who described a French peasant child attempting to steal some chocolate from the pack of a marching soldier. "She must have known that no British soldier would leave the ranks to chase her."[133] This may be seen as a typical example of an individual soldier's perception of discipline. Yet as part of a group his perception of discipline and strength is different. In the base camp at Etaples his unit was drilled by an unpleasant NCO who was nicknamed the "Black Bastard". This led to the entire draft refusing to budge at one time, and "blowing raspberries" at the hated superior, who was ultimately replaced.[134] Thus when combined, the elements of strength and justice allowed for the resurgence of civilian values and sensibilities within the group, which were expressed as a united front against the military values:

> During one of the frequent marches, one day we were plodding along when to everyone's dismay, we saw a man crucified to the wheel of a gun in the middle of a field. Everyone immediately stopped, and the whole regiment refused to go any further until they had taken the man down. Within the next half hour we saw the man taken down when we then continued marching.[135]

The man in question was undergoing 'No.1 Field Punishment': "The police fastened the soldier to a fixed object, usually a wheel, in full view of his comrades for two hours on three of four consecutive days. This notorious part of the punishment was known as 'crucifixion' because of the stance adopted. It could be a brutal practice, especially when inflicted by an old-fashioned disciplinarian."[136] This sight offended the sensibilities of these conscripts

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[133] Abraham, op. cit. p.10.

[134] ibid, p.12.

[135] Cox, op. cit. p.1.

[136] Brent-Wilson, op. cit. p.61.

probably for two reasons. First, regarding the punishment itself, the group spirit instilled a sense of shared experience. The tied man was an individual who was equal to each and every one of the passing soldiers, and as such the outrage felt was personal: this was an act of empathy as well as sympathy. Second, the visibility of the punishment was offensive. "In a survey of Warrant Officers and NCO's public exposure was one of the commonest complaints about punishments."[137] For this sight was not only shaming in absolute terms -- it was also an element of discipline from which civilian offenders were spared: "At the beginning of the nineteenth century ... the great spectacle of physical punishment disappeared; the tortured body was avoided; the theatrical representation of pain was excluded from punishment."[138]

This reversion to antiquated, and somewhat primitive concepts of punishment by the army therefore offended the conscripts both as an individuals accustomed to a measure of military discipline, and as civilians. For it seems that these men did not entirely differentiate between a military or a civilian ethos of justice and discipline. As individuals, this perception existed latently, since they felt themselves in a relatively weak position within the hierarchy. But as a group, their acceptance of military discipline was within the context of military necessities, as perceived from an essentially civilian point of view. In this context one conscript noted "two turn-outs (air raid practice) tonight and almost a row, shouting at officers and stone throwing etc."[139] Whilst going into action the daily upkeep of a military establishment was accepted as duty, but turn-outs during off-duty hours were not. Moreover, it is interesting to note that even when the group tactic failed, it occurred within a civilian evaluation of the

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[137] ibid.

[138] Foucault, Discipline and Punish, op. cit. p.14.

[139] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 15.8.1918.

situation. Thus when a concert was arranged in a neighbouring camp to which no soldier ventured due to bad weather, "we were paraded and marched down to it, a good one for 'John Bull'."[140]

Discipline in the British army was notoriously harsh, to an extent that caused a German officer to comment upon it in his diary in December 1917:

> The administration of discipline by the English is very rigid. Whilst on our side there is known to me only a single case in which a soldier on account of aggravated refusal of duty in the face of the enemy was shot, I gather from a compilation of the British orders which have been found, that at least 67 English soldiers have been shot under martial law in the period between 27 October 1916 and 30 August 1917.[141]

Whilst the use of the death penalty may not be an adequate measure of the daily practices of discipline, it was clear that in an environment of probable death, such as a battlefield, any use of it appeared querulous and extreme. The Allied troops were also acquainted with the discipline in the British army, which they often found unacceptable, and there were a number of references to these men protesting against it. One conscript noted a row that erupted over a British soldier tied to a wheel in "No. 1 Field Punishment". A group of New Zealand troops "in a camp nearby cut him loose and threatened to tie anybody up who interfered. Major Bray ordered a machine gun to be put near the wagon and turned on anybody who came near. Then they tied the chap up again. A parley between officers resulted in N.Z.'s (sic) being confined to camp."[142] On a comparative basis the conscripts were aware of their extreme disciplinary conditions. Thus whilst at a base camp "some Colonial troops came in conflict with the

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[140] Clark, op. cit. p.6.

[141] Babington, op. cit. p.247, quoting from the diary of Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, entry for 21.12.1917.

[142] Acklam, diary entry for 3.5.1918.

military police. The Colonials did not believe in being "penned up" like cattle, nor were they accustomed to that exasperating discipline to which we Tommies generally assented."[143] Another conscript, whose unit was loaned to an Australian tunnelling company, was amazed by the relaxed but effective discipline in which these Allied soldiers existed. His description highlighted the discipline to which he was accustomed in the British army, and its resulting low morale:

> We were charmed by the camaradie we found among the Australians -- and also their casual ways. There was none of that fall-in, right turn, quick march on the way to the job. We were simply told what to do & expected to go away and do it. We had a break of 5 minutes every hour & were expected to use common sense as to the best moment to take it. There was no scrounging -- everyone worked with a will, the way one should. The officers trusted the men and the men did not let the officers down.[144]

Lack of trust within an authoritarian framework may also be seen in the following diary entry: "Friday evening - Rum arrived but ordered to be drunk in front of Captain -- therefore refused."[145] This conscript perceived of himself as an adult, and refused to be treated as a child by an officer, who did not trust him. By emphasising the lack of common sense and trust in their perception of the discipline in the British army, these conscripts offered an insight into the issue as an extension of British education. Voigt was apparently put on charge after writing the following description in a letter: "Being in the army is just like being back at school; the only difference is that whereas at school your superiors generally know a little bit more about things than you do, in the army that is not the case."[146]

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[143] Barraclough, op. cit. p.3.

[144] Hall, op. cit. pp. 11-2.

[145] Bryan, op. cit. diary entry for 1.6.1917.

[146] Voigt, Combed Out, (1929 edition), p.77.

The aforementioned conscripted teacher expounded upon this similarity: "The most startling thing that I have learned about teaching is the similarity between many of our methods in School and the methods of officers and N.C.O.'s in the army. How often have I resented the bullying manner and truculent tone of sergeants and corporals and then suddenly remembered that I have, on occasion, used the same words and adopted the same tone to my boys in School."[147] This description of the contemporary British school system was well substantiated in a collection of memoirs about the experiences of childhood in Edwardian England. Most of the interviewees, apart from those who went away to boarding school, described their education as a minor event, centering mostly around discipline. Thus, for example, Clifford Hills, who was raised in a village, recalled: "No, I can't say that I did enjoy school. We were glad to get away from school. We got the cane and played truant."[148] Annie Wilson, who grew up in Nottingham, claimed that "we were all terrified of teachers you know. 'You wait till you get to school. The teacher'll soon straighten you out', if you'd been naughty at home you see. And you went to school in fear."[149] In his autobiography, the author V.S. Pritchett wrote a succinct summary of the issue:

> In most schools such a crowd was kept in order by the cane. ... To talk in class was a crime, to leave one's desk inconceivable. Discipline was meant to encourage subservience, and to squash rebellion -- very undesirable in children who would grow up to obey orders from their betters.[150]

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[147] Henderson, op. cit. part 43.

[148] Thea Thompson, Edwardian Childhoods, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p.54.

[149] ibid. p.92.

[150] V S Pritchett, A Cab at the Door, (Penguin, 1971), p.88.

In this light, discipline in the British army, especially as perceived by these conscripts, may be seen as a one way system of orders to be obeyed, unquestioningly. "Early in my army life I discovered that thinking for oneself was one of the most useless things that any soldier could attempt to do. Over and over again I have tried to use my intelligence, to seize the idea of some movement and to act accordingly, and when I have been asked what I meant by thus acting and have replied that I thought that was what was wanted I have been told "Don't think. In the army just do as you're told. It doesn't pay to think." How I have resented that scornful retort: how unjust I have felt it!"[151] Another conscript recalled being very surprised by a new commanding officer who expected him to take initiative. "This was something quite new to me, up to now initiative had been frowned upon."[152]

A further civilian aspect of military discipline perceived by these men was its similarity to the discipline found in the work-place. There also initiative was expected only from those situated higher up in the hierarchy, whilst a group spirit often existed in the shop-floor, giving the workers a degree of strength and control over their conditions. Whereas management in the civilian work-place imposed discipline, the ethos of this structure also offered protective measures -- as in the case noted above in which a section adopted the approach of "no pay, no work",[153] an attitude taken usually in an industrial dispute. Beyond the group effort, the principle behind this incident was taken directly from the civilian world of trade relations, which was conceptually alien to the military establishment. Yet since most of these men had come from a background in which it was prevalent, their attitude was undeniably determined

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[151] Henderson, op. cit. part 43.

[152] Abraham, op. cit. p.89.

[153] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 9.7.1917.

by it. As noted above, in the discussion of money, one conscript framed his entire approach to his military experience in the comparative terms of a job of work, when he noted that as a soldier he got no bonuses or "any other sops".[154] Another man, following a similar line of reasoning, claimed that during the war,

> Engineers, Miners, Railwaymen etc. threat[end] to strike for increases in their wages, whilst we in the Army had not even the option of lodging a complaint and in addition to existing on very meagre rations and experiencing the hardships of a bitter campaign, were daily risking our lives for a mere pittance.[155]

Thus one hierarchial institution, the army, seemed to emulate the other, industry. The conscripts were the workers; the NCO's were the supervisors; and the officers, coupled with the ambiguous "authorities" such as GHQ, were the management. Most of the literature dealing with the subject of labour history[156] appears to agree that the concept, if not the implementation, of labour organization and negotiations existed in the British labour force by 1914. Indeed, as Zeitlin notes, "few nations have the unbroken record of trade union organization and collective bargaining which distinguishes the history of industrial relations in Britain."[157] In the period 1880-1914 membership in trade unions rose from 4% to 25%, and even traditional craft unions were invaded by unskilled workers, thus removing the concept of collectivity from the "preserve of a privileged minority."[158] Within this emerging

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[154] Abraham, op. cit. p.17.

[155] Bradbury, op. cit. preface.

[156] For an encompassing list of bibliography on the subject see: Jonathan Zeitlin, "From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations", Economic History Review, XL, 2 (1987); pp. 179-184.

[157] ibid. p.178.

[158] John Benson, "Work", in idem, (ed.), The Working Class in England 1875-1914, (Croom Helm, 1985), p.66.

structure of industrial relations, "it is clear that the foreman formed the vital link in the chain of command (and still does), [but] the collective discipline of the work group or squad was often more important than formal directives from management. Many firms were pressing for efficient subordination of workmen to managerial authority ... but others recognized the value of a 'responsible autonomy' in the execution of certain tasks."[159] It appears that the conscripts often saw themselves as workers detailed to do a job of work -- fighting a war -- and as such expected a degree of 'responsible autonomy'. As will be shown in the following chapter, they were often granted this autonomy due to the circumstances of war and the imposed functional character of the BEF. But the one sphere in which this autonomy was more elusive was military discipline.

In summarizing these conscripts perceptions of discipline in the British army, one may surmise that they based them upon values and concepts copied from their civilian life. School experiences coupled with work-place values shaped their outlook, and thus their behaviour. One may therefore conclude that discipline was a sphere in which two sets of values, rather than expectations, clashed. The military authorities, who had a prevailing concept of discipline from pre-war days, accepted civilians as volunteers. The conscripts, having failed to do so, were categorized as unwilling. Unwillingness was a trait identified in schoolchildren, and thus they treated the conscripts. The latter, on the other hand, saw themselves as responsible adults used to doing a job of work. As such, they responded only to those elements within the military disciplinary framework which were relevant to what they considered their job description -- fighting a war. The other elements, those related to the professional ethos of

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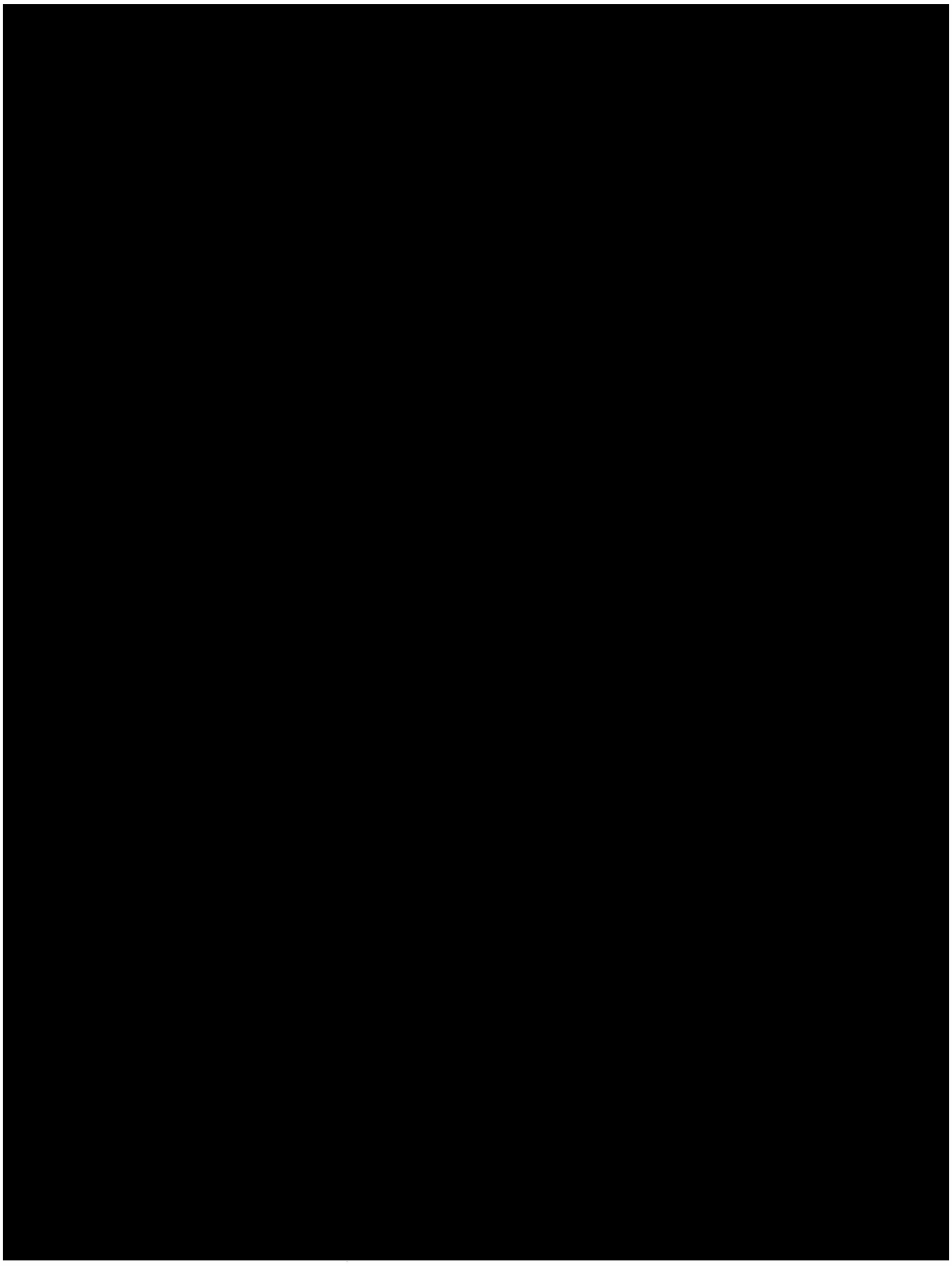
[159] Joseph Melling, "'Non-Commissioned Officers': British Employers and their Supervisory Workers, 1880-1920", Social History, Vol.5, No.2 (1980), p.189.

soldiering, were of no interest to them, and as such were either reviled, avoided or disregarded.

C. Identity amd War

There's something amazingly commonplace in
the whole huge drama; and something amazingly
dramatic in the commonplaceness of it all.
Anyway it's allvery silly.

(Blore, letter of 10.1.1917)



What did they expect of our toil and extreme
Hunger -- the perfect drawing of a heart's dream?
Did they look for a book of wrought art's perfection,
Who promised no reading, nor praise, nor publication?

(From "War Books" by Ivor Gurney)

Chapter Nine: Organization and War

On October 30, 1915, just five weeks before his resignation, Sir John French, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force in France, sent king George V a telegram:

> There is no sacrifice the troops are not prepared to make to uphold the honour and traditions of Your Majesty's Army and to secure final and complete victory.[1]

French was responding to the king's congratulations on the doubtfully successful Loos offensive which was launched on September 25, 1915. As such, he was speaking for an army composed of the remnants of the pre-war regular army and the Territorials, and some of the volunteers of Kitchener's new armies. This is the army that has since become immortalized in the public mind as the force that fought and won the Great War. Yet barely two months later conscription was introduced, and by the end of the war it was the conscripts who were dominant in the BEF. Whilst their commitment to final and complete victory was undoubted, their attitude to the honour and traditions of the British army must be viewed in a different light.

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[1] Diary of Sir John French, entry for 30.9.1915, vol M, French Papers, IWM 75/46/2.

The conscripts owed their military identity and human survival to the British Expeditionary Force, or, as it was commonly conceived by them, the army. It was the army which regulated, and often defined every aspect of their existence. As a foregone conclusion one may note that those who were lucky enough to survive the military components of war, such as open battle, sniping and ammunition accidents, did indeed survive on a human, existential level. In the chapters above these conscripts' experiences were charted within the separate aspects of their daily existence. This concluding chapter will focus upon their overall perception of the army as an organization responsible for their human survival -- their attitude towards it, and ultimately their identity within it. In other words, it will be an attempt to establish the veracity of "how the soldiers were treated whilst fighting for their King and Country and of the lack of proper arrangements which marked every movement undertaken by the Army in France."[2]

The organization of the army was apparent to these conscripts in two major ways: As a regulating body which set the schedule of their existence, and as a provider of their needs, an aspect which is discussed above. The general terms of this schedule, as shown above, were enlistment via conscription; basic and advanced training in England; shipment overseas to France; a short supplementary course of training in a base camp; placement within a section of the Western Front; and rotation between different lines and sections of the front. The bulk of the conscripts' experiences discussed here occurred in the latter stage, within the confines of the British Expeditionary Force.

The conscription of an individual into the army was basically a bureaucratic process, enacted by the civilian branches of government for the benefit of the military. Once in the army, the

[2] Bradbury, op. cit. p.1.

organization of the conscripts' training in England and in France was distinct from the period in the combat zone. Firstly, training camps were placed within civilian populations largely unaffected by the battles and devastation of the war, who thus offered the conscripts an accessible option of non-military existence. This situation was close to total reversal in the combat zone:

> The British army was complete in itself and contact with French people was not very necessary, nor were there so many French as English in the war-zone.[3]

The civilians were not only few, but they also suffered from the war themselves. The conscripts could therefore find wine, food and even good cheer in these villages or towns, but not a normal and detached civilian existence.[4]

Secondly, the regime within the camps adhered, as much as possible, to the rigid disciplinary and intentionalist structure of the pre-war British army. As such it afforded the conscripts with a hierarchic, reliable and strictly regulated existence in which all their needs were provided for. In the combat zone a conscript was subject to discipline, rotas of duties and parades, yet the essence of his existence was individualistic, incorporating at most the other men of his section. "With a few exceptions as in any circumstance in life the one "in action" required that all should support one another and so as regards the individual war brought out the best in each."[5] Therefore, it was each man, rather than the army as an organization, who effectively offered his close comrades a support system. Moreover, men had to be resourceful and self reliant at all times, not only in action. This issue is discussed throughout the chapters

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[3] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.39.

[4] For a discussion of this issue see above chapter 7, "Mud and War"

[5] Jamieson, op. cit. Epilogue.

above in various ways, such as in their scrounging for food, the independent construction of dug-outs in the line, or even the search for billets behind the lines. Thus, for example, a conscript who arrived in Ypres after being relieved in the front line, had to "search for a place to sleep in. Found one at last."[6] In other words, the army organization could be relied upon to decide where these men would go and what their duties should be, yet its role as provider was much diminished:

> We marched (or shall I say straggled) back to FLESQUIERS where we sat on the pavement for over an hour whilst the Officers in charge endeavoured to find us billets for the night, but getting properly fed up, impatient, and being dead tired, we entered the cellar of a big ruined house and after a bit of patching up succeeded in making it comfortable; someone gathered together some fuel and a fire was made then one by one we fell asleep on the floor and remained so until the morning.[7]

The removal of the conscript to the front line was therefore his removal from a situation of near total reliance upon the army as a protector and provider, to one of greatly increased self-sufficiency and reliance upon a small group of comrades. Whilst the army undoubtedly set the schedule and agenda of this existence, it was often up to each conscript to provide for himself within it.

The schedule in the combat zone revolved around the principle of rotation, both within the line itself, and between different sections of it. This was clearly an attempt to spread the onus of duties and exposure to the enemy as evenly as possible between all the available manpower. Thus one conscript wrote that "some time ago I had to do three night sentries in a small shell hole, at the end of a sap called Lunatic Sap -- only about 15 yards from the Hun

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[6] Fraser, op. cit. diary entry for 20.8.1917.

[7] Bradbury, op. cit. p.50.

lines! that was very rotten!"[8] In contrast another man recalled a tour of duty in a sector of the front line which was periodically quiet: "For the first two weeks at "Ypres" nothing occurred of very great importance."[9]

Two duty rotas were permanent fixtures not only in the front and rest lines, but also throughout every corps and unit in the combat zone: gas guard and sentry duty.[10] Parallel to these were the schedules of military and combat duties, working parties, and finally rest periods. Once in the line, the rotation of trench duties followed a set pattern:

> The usual routine for infantrymen in France was as follows: three weeks or a month moving between the front, support, and reserve lines, passing five or six days in each, though variations occurred in more strenuous or quieter times; then followed perhaps ten days at a rest camp eight or ten miles back, or occasionally a still longer period twenty or thirty miles to the rear.[11]

The foremost line was also known as the "advanced" post, and the rest line was sometimes the "reserve."[12] The distance between the first two lines was approximately 100 yards, whilst the reserve, or third line was one or two miles back. Six days in each line was the maximum period referred to in these writings, in which men also note three and four day rotations.[13] Three general and somewhat flexible rules appear to have determined these routines. First, that the length of time spent at the front was dependant upon the activity in a given area, the

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[8] Evans, op. cit. letter of 12.12.1916.

[9] Lawton, op. cit. p.17.

[10] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.1.

[11] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.21.

[12] Abraham, op. cit. p.32.

[13] See for example: Hall, op. cit. p.5; Adams, op. cit. p.6; Abraham, op. cit. p.28.

least time being spent in a quiet sector.[14] Second, that a unit would spend equal amounts of time in each line of the sector, even though the period in the rest line could be longer. And third, that the principle of rotation meant that a given unit would always occupy all three lines within a given sector, not just the front or the reserve line, for example. However, the sequence of rotation would not always commence with the front line.[15]

The basic problem with the front line schedule was that men were usually on duty rotas divided into hours rather than days:

> When we were in an advanced post we were all on duty throughout the night, and during the day we did two hour spells on and two, perhaps four, hours off, according to the number of points we had to man and the number of men available for duty.[16]

Another common routine was 24 or even 48 hour duty, in which men were constantly rotating each other in blocks of two hours on and off. These two hourly formations, whilst securing constant attention to the enemy, meant, as discussed above, that even in a quiet sector the men got little respite or rest. "Two hours in a dug-out where thirteen men filled a space barely large enough for eight was not conducive to sleep."[17]

Existence in the support line, in comparison, was usually divided between night and day. During the latter men were often cramped together in a bivouac or a dug-out, or performed duties under cover, since they were not allowed to be seen.[18] Thus sleep was difficult here

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[14] Adams, op. cit. p.6.

[15] Abraham, op. cit. p.28.

[16] ibid. p.32.

[17] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.24.

[18] Adams, op. cit. p.5.

also, since the night hours were devoted to work parties up the line, which comprised activities such as trench digging or carrying ammunition. In quiet periods this was often beneficial to the men themselves:

> Working parties ... [were] organized from the different Companies who were in the "line", by which means the trenches were made habitable, new "dug-outs" were built, the direct front of the line and all "craters" were well wired, the trenches were deepened, and I think in every sense the whole position was made much more secure, and although "Tommy" often complained of "overwork" and very little sleep, yet when all was done, we all felt that those who had instigated the work were fully justified.[19]

But men who were on working parties during bouts of shelling did not usually echo the latter sentiment: "The strain of these nights upon us was very great, so that it was not unusual to see a man burst into tears on the return journey, or to give himself up to cursing everything and everybody, after falling heavily in the darkness."[20]

The tension, lack of rest and hard work which characterized the conscripts' existence in the two forward lines led them to prefer life in the third, or reserve line. This was considered overall to be the best location in the combat zone, since it was "far enough back to be out of range of minnies, good deep trenches, well maintained, off duty spells even at night and ... no working parties even at night."[21] These conditions, coupled with the fatigue accumulated during the days in the front lines, meant that the conscripts spent as much of their time as possible in the third line resting or sleeping.[22]

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[19] Lawton, op. cit. p.16.

[20] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.26.

[21] Abraham, op. cit. p.64.

[22] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 11.10.1916.

It was the infantrymen who mostly experienced this form of existence, since they manned the trenches and ultimately suffered the heaviest losses. As a result the image of the soldiers' experience in the Great War is also largely limited to this aspect of front line duty, yet the lives of gunners and artillerymen were not that different. The guns were usually fixed in one line, which was set slightly back from the front line, and thus the rotation in these positions was usually simply between the two:

> We had 24 hours off and 24 hours on [the gun]. When it came your turn to do 24 hours off, you went back perhaps a mile to a camp of some sort for 24 hours rest.[23]

Yet in some positions this schedule, or any other form of short period rotation, was impossible. In the case of the infantry it was the men who relocated, and thus despite cumbersome battle order and heavy overcoats this could be achieved with relative ease. Gunners were dependant upon the guns, and once these were in position they had to be constantly manned. Sometimes, however, gun lines were set far from a rest line, due to topographic and strategic reasons, in which case gunners found themselves "in the line" for much longer periods than 24 hours. One conscript recalled spending two weeks in such a situation, when posted to a gun line that "was very important as it kept a lot of the enemy artillery engaged."[24] Alongside descriptions of filth and misery, he makes it clear that rest or sleep evaded him and his fellow gunners throughout much of the time they spent there:

> First of all it was foolhardy to wander about the site during the day as it was under enemy observation, secondly the guns could not be fired at night as the flashes would expose the exact position and invite a hail of shells, so it meant that on order from our observation officer we had to dash from cover fire and salvo of shots on fixed targets and then dash for cover again. ... [as a result] we were on the quiver (sic) all day long waiting for the command "Action."[25]

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[23] Rudge, op. cit. p.18.

[24] Creek, op. cit. p.37.

[25] ibid.

The fourth line occupied by soldiers within the schedule of rotation in the combat zone was the rest line, usually located a few miles behind the reserve line. The routines of extended physical exertion coupled with fear, tension and fatigue which these conscripts experienced in the front lines could lead to the logical assumption that they eagerly awaited their days in the rest line. Their preferences, however, appear to have been in direct contradiction to this line of reasoning. As one conscript, a signaller in the RFA, wrote in his diary: "12.30 PM. Am now all ready to leave and rejoin section [behind the lines] ... I am rather sorry for I should like to have kept in action as a telephonist as a rest really means hard work in the horse lines just behind the firing line."[26] This sentiment is expressed in many of the writings discussed here, by soldiers of every unit. Thus an infantryman noted that "they were called rest days but in these 4 days we did carrying parties, taking food and ammunition to the men in the front every night after dark and sometimes it was morning before we got back."[27] Another man noted in his diary: "Some rest! Up to the trenches again for fatigue at night."[28] A gunner claimed that "instead of having a rest, you were carrying ammunition up ... to the guns. You were better off on the guns than you were having time off. If you had nothing to do on the guns, you could get a bit of sleep in the dugouts."[29] The issue is best summarized by the conscript who recalled that "since life was more difficult when we were only a little way back, we felt relieved to be making our way towards the front line on Christmas Eve."[30]

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[26] Bishop, op. cit. diary entry for 31.5.1917.

[27] Hall, op. cit. p.5.

[28] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 15.9.1917.

[29] Rudge, op. cit. p.18.

[30] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.27.

Periods of rest in camps located even further back were also considered unwelcome to some conscripts: "Went in Brigade rest at Bouchier. Working parties during the day and guard at night. Hardest time of my life. About 2 hours rest out of 24 every day."[31] Even a week of rest in a town, which potentially offered the option of better food and evenings in an estaminet, was sometimes deemed worse than a tour of trench duty: "Truly we had no rest whatever ... Our company had to work all day doing odd jobs for the Town Major ... we were glad to push off again to the line a week later."[32]

Training and practice camps far from the front were another form of respite, if not rest from the front line routine. One conscript spent two weeks at a Trench Mortar School in Beauval:

> Here we were billeted in a barn, along with 500 others, up a flight of stairs. Our hours of instruction were 9 am to 10.30, 11.0 to 12.0 and 2.0 to 4.0. This was a very easy time for us, our only grievance being that we were insufficiently fed.[33]

But another conscript, who was sent on a signalling course at Henesourt complained "it was a miserable place, no money, no fags, no nothing, and it lasted for 3 weeks, I was glad to get away."[34] Others also found these periods of relative relaxation "not very congenial in a time of war as there is too much time at one's disposal for thinking of possibilities which might easily become realities."[35] Uncongenial thoughts were sometimes an abstraction of a further aspect of routine: boredom. Even if a schedule incorporated much hard work and fear, the fact

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[31] Dixon, op. cit. diary entry for 25.2.1917.

[32] R D Fisher, op. cit. pp. 45-6. A commanding officer, working in conjunction with the local mayor or similar dignitary, was allotted to each French or Belgian town that was taken over by the British army.

[33] Holdsworth, op. cit. p.3.

[34] Clark, op. cit. p.6.

[35] Adams, op. cit. p.6.

that it was set within fixed divisions of time and labour reduced it to routine. Many of these conscripts complained of being bored, even when exhausted. Thus whilst in the line one man claimed that "the four day routine was rather boring."[36] A gunner and driver in the RFA who spent two months in a training camp located near a village far behind the line uttered a similar opinion, despite his days being completely filled with practice and horse-care. As a result he was quite happy to go on a two week signalling course, even though it meant a three mile walk each way, "and be relieved of the boring fatigue duties with our wagon line."[37]

This apparent dislike of rest periods stemmed not only from the extra work alloted to the men, or even the possibility of boredom; but also, and perhaps largely from another facet of days spent away from the front lines: "... a special rest [was] granted to the division for its good work, but after all there's not much rest, it is all parade, parade every day, and plenty of field days."[38] Within these conscripts' cognizance of army organization "rest" merely implied the removal of combat duties, and hence also the explicit onus of fear and tension. All of these, however, were replaced by extra fatigues, alongside drills and parades -- both the latter having been diminished to the point of extinction in the front line.

Life in the combat zone was practically devoid of the routines and outer trappings of the British army as a professional institution; but beyond this area and its exclusive focus upon combat and survival, these elements became apparent. The further removed a camp was from the front line, the stricter and more formal the regime within it. Thus life in a retreat sap,

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[36] Hall, op. cit. p.5.

[37] Hollingsworth, op. cit. p.10.

[38] Clark, op. cit. p.11.

according to one conscript, incorporated daily rifle drills, saluting and equipment parade.[39] The schedule of a week's "rest" slightly further back, in a wagon line, comprised labour fatigues, drills, exercises and "dress [parade] this morning then harness cleaning."[40] Still further back, at a Divisional Head Quarters to which a conscript was sent on guard duty for a week, a Brigadier held several inspection parades since he was dissatisfied with the shine upon the men's buttons and straps.[41] Even marching between camps and sectors behind the lines, entailed, at each point, "the full marching order inspection prior to moving. They were a constant nuisance."[42] The ultimate reversion to a strict army regime was found in the large base camps on the coast, which strongly resembled those in England. As one conscript wrote of Etaples: "It's dreadful to be in a place so full of rules and regulations;"[43] and conscripts had little interest in the rules and regulations of the British Expeditionary Force.

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Four main conclusions may be drawn from these conscripts' perceptions of their schedule, both in and out of the line. First, that it was predictable: a stint in the front line would lead to one in the support line and thence the reserve, after which a few days would be spent out at rest. The cycle would then inevitably repeat itself, or be delayed by a train journey on cattle trucks and a march to another sector. As a result of this routine, the second conclusion

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[39] Copson, op. cit. p.6.

[40] Acklam, op. cit. diary entry for 18.3.1917.

[41] Harris, op. cit. diary entry for 30.12.1916.

[42] Bradbury, op. cit. p.51.

[43] Gale, op. cit. letter of 28.7.1916.

is that location as a point of identification was irrelevant. A sector was deemed to be "quiet" or "windy" rather than in Arras or Verdun, and it was always divided into three lines. The mud and general desolation of the war zone also wrought a uniform landscape throughout much of the front line, which reduced the singularity of a given geographical location. Thus, for example, one conscript was part of a working party sent to build a dugout at the front. "At about 5.0 P.M. ... we got lost and kept getting in the road of the shells. It became dark and still we were stumbling and slipping about along the muddy tracks with a guide to help us. ... all this district is the picture of the most dreary ruination and desolation that has ever been."[44] In addition, men often had no idea of their exact situation, since they were not told, and in absence of a map foreign names in an unknown area meant little, and there are many references to conscripts going "somewhere up the line for the 13th Batt."[45] Within this context army organization was therefore crucial, since men mainly identified themselves as part of a unit which was in or out of the line. This was well illustrated in a diary entry written by a driver who went down the line with his unit:

> Coming back, my horses got behind and finally stopped and I had to lead them and got lost. Nobody seemed to know where our lines were and I wandered through theirs. Finally got near a red cross station near our lines but it was getting dark. I landed at 187 Bde where they told me to stay, fed the horses, gave me some supper and I slept in a forage tent. [Next day] Fed horses again then set off without any directions, as even the major of 187 Bde didn't know where we were, but I got a note to say I had reported there.[46]

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[44] idem. letter of 17.8.1916.

[45] Clark, op. cit. p.5.

[46] Acklam, op. cit. diary entries for 11/12.10.1916.

The third conclusion is that time and its normative divisions became a somewhat abstract notion in the front line. As one conscript put it: "One loses all count of time during war."[47] Civilian measures of time in years, months and days were replaced at the front by a continuous existence of hours; which battle could then further distort into "little stirring minutes, that seemed hours."[48] Two or four or 24 hours on or off duty marked progress through daylight, in which men had to keep under cover, and night in which most of the routine combat duty occurred. This existence also greatly diminished the possibilities of rest and sleep, whilst fear and tension were integral features of a combat zone. Thus the mental implications of this schedule distorted these men's perceptions of time still further.

Diarists, or men with access to a diary, could keep a formal track of time by referring to a calender. Yet this was merely an abstraction, since the implication of time passing as represented by a date was unsubstantiated: They had not lived through a day's work and a night's rest, but rather through so many hours on and off duty. The point at which 23:59 became 00.00 as a mark of a time cycle completed was irrelevant to a man who had already completed several cycles of two hour duties, and was in the midst of another. In other words these men existed not only in an desolate combat zone, but also in a detached time zone.

This mental and physical isolation, however, appeared to have been acceptable to them within the context of their front line existence, since it was an integral part of combat, and ultimately victory. Thus a fourth conclusion is that they resented any element within the schedule that was not strictly concerned with combat or survival -- as was apparent in their dislike of rest

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[47] Creek, op. cit. p.41.

[48] Gale, op. cit. letter of 17.8.1916.

periods which were suffused with drills and parades. In coupling this element to their overall attitude to discipline, as discussed in the previous chapter, one may surmise that their perception therefore remained that of civilians hired to do a job of work, which was fighting a war on behalf of their country. That they were commissioned to do so within the confines of a professional organization which also had other aims and ethos, interested them little. The issue was best illustrated in the account of a conscript who was

> warned by Orderly Sergt ... to report with Wilkie and O'Burne as officers' servants. Did not like the idea at all, so we and Eades went to see C.S.M. and told him we joined the army to fight so he asked us whether we wanted to be put on draft. We said we did and so we were told we would be for a draft on Saturday.[49]

Thus, in reference to Sir John French's telegram above, it was clear these conscripts were definitely willing to "secure final and complete victory," but not necessarily to uphold the traditions of the British army.

[49] W L Fisher, op. cit. diary entry for 8.8.1917.

Chapter Ten: Conclusion -- The Identity of Conscripts

The purpose of this study was to depict a subjective view of the experiences of some British conscripts, as a means to defining a cultural identity. This was done within the conceptual confines of the definitions -- of the overall population, of the texts and of the methodology -- laid down in chapter 1. In the previous chapters of Part II, the element of experience was surveyed from many aspects of human existence, all of which emanated from the writings of these conscripts. It now remains to collect these threads into a definition of their identity -- as resultant from these writings. In other words, to draw a conclusion from the analysis.

In the methodological introduction to this dissertation it was noted that "a premise of this study is that the mental and physical framework of the British army, within which the conscripts existed, was a total institution."[1] The relevance of this concept in explaining the identity of these conscripts rests upon the sociologist Erving Goffman's definition of it,

> as a breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating these three spheres of life [sleep, play and work]. First, all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority. Second, each phase of the member's daily activity is carried on in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike and required to do the same thing together. Third, all phases of the day's activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a prearranged time into the next, the whole sequence of activities being imposed from above by a system of explicit rulings and a body of officials. Finally, the various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfil the official aims of the institution.[2]

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[1] See above: Part I, "Methods", p.

[2] Erving Goffman, Asylums, op. cit. p.17.

In applying this definition to the British Expeditionary Force it is clear that it was a total institution; both in concept and, more significantly, in the way it was perceived by the conscripts discussed in this dissertation. As shown above, each of Goffman's attributes may be applied, to a certain extent, to these men's experiences. They were brought together under a single authority -- the army. Henceforth they ate, drank, smoked, slept, fought, bathed, hunted lice, marched through mud, and shared parcels and fear together. None of these men, unless he became lost or detached from his unit, ever experienced any aspect of life in (or out) of the line as an individual. Yet this does not countermand an inner, individualistic identity. Their external, visible existence was conceptually, and practically, collective. Moreover, despite the sudden developments of war, this was done within a tight, imposed and predictable schedule over which they had no control. The ultimate paradox of their existence, however, was that within the confines of this total institution they often had to fend for themselves.

The validity of the first three elements, unity of place, company and schedule, led inevitably to the fourth. But it was the very rationality of the army's plan, to fight and win the war, which reduced their existence to irrationality. The circumstances of an extended and stagnant war drained every reserve within the BEF yet imposed increasing responsibilities upon it. In this perspective, the evolvement of the conscripts' front-line existence reflected upon the devolvement of the BEF into a functionalist organization which provided its men with a framework for survival, rather than a structured and reliable existence. In other words, its ability to be a total institution should have been much reduced; and in practical terms -- it was. But the fact that this army did manage to operate as a total institution was largely due

to the implicit and explicit acceptance of it as such by the inmates -- in this case the conscripts.

For despite their complaints and their basic lack of interest in military formalities, these conscripts accepted the BEF as a total institution. Their training in England, where the army as an institution could indeed meet its definition, led them to view it initially in this light. Their subsequent placement overseas within alien and often hostile territory left them with little option other than to perpetuate this perception. Moreover, beyond rebellion, which not one of them mentions even in passing,[3] no other formation or organization appeared to them as a possible replacement. Yet they obviously felt a need to conceive of themselves as part of an organization which bestowed upon them a conceptual framework, which, however, could never be more than an abstraction:

> It is a function of the impersonality of modern war that the soldier is coerced, certainly at times by people whom he can identify, but more frequently, more continuously and harshly by vast, unlocalized forces against which he may rail, but at which he cannot strike back and to which he must ultimately submit.[4]

In discussing these conscripts perceptions of the army as an organization one must therefore conclude that they were based upon their acceptance of it as an impersonal but total institution. The fact that its totality was apparent mainly in the schedule it set rather than its reliability as a provider wrought the second tenet of their perception: human survival. Thus the sustained emphasis upon rest and sleep as a focus of their attitude to the schedule, both

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[3] As with every other discussed in this narrative, it stemms solely from the writings of these men. Thus the issue of rebellion may be of interest, but it does not pertain to this work since it was not mentioned by any of these men.

[4] John Keegan, The Face of Battle, (Penguin, 1978), p.331.

in and out of the line; their obsessive interest in food; their reliance upon cigarettes and drink; and their fear and intense dislike of the mud and the rain. Any aspect of their existence which did not reflect upon any of these or combat was totally rejected by them, in the severest of terms: "[A general] told us that we were leaving the Third Army and joining the Fifth, or vice versa, as though a great honour was being bestowed upon us. As we thought it was most unlikely that this would make any improvement in our rations or living conditions the news left us cold."[5] In these two sentences lie the essence of the conscripts' attitude to the army: Rejection of the military establishment, and a focus upon means of survival.

This attitude, and the identity embedded within it, was summarized in the following account:

> It was always a joy to us to get away from the "line" for a little recuperation, and I may say that as a rule "Tommies'" rest consisted of numerous drills, inspections and working parties, polishing our buttons and brasses which to my mind is a farce, and was a thing with which we had to occupy our time when out on rest, and I can fully understand now why so many of the photographs of the British Tommy in the Press were headed with the words - "The bright and cheerful Tommy" and "He is happy, are you?" and I have often thought that the true "heading" should have been:- "Underneath a bright uniform lies a heavy heart".[6]

The retrospectively positive words with which this conscript commenced the passage deteriorate in face of his description of the drills and parades of the military establishment; disappearing entirely with the word "farce," which is particularly striking. Yet he was not alone in using it when describing his existence. Another man wrote of "a medical exam which as usual is a formal farce;"[7] whilst a third reflected upon the "collosal farce of one charming

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[5] Abraham, op. cit. p.86.

[6] Lawton, op. cit. p.5.

[7] Harris, op. cit. diary entry for 18.12.1916.

Englishman crawling on his state fed tummy across a state-battered strip of 'every-man's-land,'"[8] in order to shoot a state-fed German of similar intent.

A farce is a "hollow pretence, a mockery,"[9] and it was in this manner that these conscripts' viewed themselves and their existence: they were civilian soldiers whose identity was neither. The military establishment was deemed farcical and as such inappropriate for identification; yet the basic implication of conscription was enforced attachment to it and thus being presented to civilian eyes. They, however, saw themselves as the civilians they once were, designated to do a job of work in the army, with the pretence of soldiering thrust upon them. For as soldiers they were "amateurs"[10] who felt no desire to become professionals, beyond the qualifications required for executing the job of fighting a war. But having lost their physical contact with daily civilian life, and never having acquired a mental attachment to the role of soldiers, their identity became one of alienated civilians.

> We existed in a little world of our own, when we were in the line we had little time for social calls on neighbours and when we were out we did not normally wander far from our billet or canteen.[11]

The BEF gave these men a schedule of existence, and also offered them a framework for identification; yet they felt no point of contact with the establishment of the army.

> We were regrouped [in Etaples] and parted with our insignia identifying us with the 19th City of London Regiment. Our cap badges, shoulder names, fancy buttons we all discarded to be replaced by insignia linking us now to the 2nd Battalion

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[8] Blore. op. cit. letter of 10.1.1917.

[9] The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.

[10] R D Fisher, op. cit. p.2.

[11] Abraham, op. cit. p.45.

> Worcestershire Regiment. As I had never developed any particular loyalty for the London Regiment, into which I had been unceremoniously thrust a few months previously, and no one had taken time or trouble to tell us anything about the traditions or battle honours of the regiment it was not difficult to transfer to a new regiment equally unknown.[12]

At the same time, however, these conscripts had lost the daily experience of civilian life, and thus a framework for such an identity. Leave was an "oasis in the desert" which was often dreamt of, but rarely attained. Their letters were filtered through the barriers of censorship and experiences which could not be translated into civilian terms. Communications from home perpetuated their past, whilst diaries marked the time spent away from both. Thus a gunner, who was married with two children, commenced his entries every Monday with the sentence "In the army x [e.g. 22] weeks"[13], followed by "Away from home x weeks" every Thursday, and "On Active Service x weeks" every Saturday. The present, the military existence -- filled with routine and sheer horror -- was constantly measured in face of the past, and basically refuted.

At the start of this analysis the broad population of conscripts was defined as

> a group of men of one nationality, from unknown but varied backgrounds, who were placed together within the confines of a total institution. Their placement was made possible due to the force of law, and not through their personal desire. As a result, their motivation in fulfilling the purpose of their placement, fighting a war, was unclear, and possibly negative -- due to a mental conflict of interest between self preservation and social standards.[14]

Thus a synthesis between this conceptual definition, and the specific analysis of these writings, both in the realms of style and content, leads to a conclusion that beyond their

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[12] F.A.J. Taylor, op. cit. p.47.

[13] Bennet, op. cit. passim.

[14] Chapter 1, "Methods", p.25.

knowledge of themselves as human beings who had to survive and function, there was no viable or tangible element in the daily lives of these men with which they could identify. Ultimately, therefore, these conscripts opted for a non-identity -- a "No-Man's-Land":

> I'm asleep at present -- I've signed on to be & I'm not allowed to be anything else. I sit in clubs & estaminets with my own poor uniformed self in hundreds. We say & do the same silly things. We've got to.[15]

[15] Blore, op. cit. letter of 30.9.1917.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: Copy of an attestation form

Medically unfit for garrison duty in France and Flanders 7/11/16 J Prod

6015 Groom

CERTIFIED COPY OF ATTESTATION.

No. _____ Name _____ Corps G. S.

Questions to be put to the Recruit before Enlistment.

1. What is your Name?	1.	Harry Danforth Cook
2. What is your full Address?	2.	82 Broadgreen Rd Liverpool
3. Are you a British Subject?	3.	Yes
4. What is your Age?	4.	29 Years 2 1/2 Months
5. What is your Trade or Calling?	5.	Commercial Traveller
6. Are you Married?	6.	Yes
7. Have you ever served in any branch of His Majesty's Forces, naval or military, if so, *which?	7.	No
8. Are you willing to be vaccinated or re-vaccinated?	8.	Yes
9. Are you willing to be enlisted for General Service?	9.	Yes
10. Did you receive a Notice, and do you understand its meaning, and who gave it to you?	10.	Yes — Name Sgt Foble; Corps 8 Gar
11. Are you willing to serve upon the following conditions provided His Majesty should so long require your services? For the duration of the War, at the end of which you will be discharged with all convenient speed. You will be required to serve for one day with the colours and the remainder of the period in the Army Reserve in accordance with the provisions of the Royal Warrant dated 20th October, 1915, until such time as you may be called up by Order of the Army Council. If employed with Hospitals, depôts of Mounted Units, or as a Clerk, &c., you may be retained after the termination of hostilities until your services can be spared, but such retention shall in no case exceed six months.	11.	Yes

I, _____ do solemnly declare that the above answers made by me to the above questions are true, and that I am willing to fulfil the engagements made.

_____ SIGNATURE OF RECRUIT.

_____ *Signature of Witness.*

OATH TO BE TAKEN BY RECRUIT ON ATTESTATION.

I, _____ swear by Almighty God, that I will be faithful and bear true Allegiance to His Majesty King George the Fifth, His Heirs, and Successors, and that I will, as in duty bound, honestly and faithfully defend His Majesty, His Heirs, and Successors, in Person, Crown, and Dignity, against all enemies, and will observe and obey all orders of His Majesty, His Heirs, and Successors, and of the Generals and Officers set over me. So help me God.

CERTIFICATE OF MAGISTRATE OR ATTESTING OFFICER.

The Recruit above named was cautioned by me that if he made any false answer to any of the above questions he would be liable to be punished as provided in the Army Act.

The above questions were then read to the Recruit in my presence.

I have taken care that he understands each question, and that his answer to each question has been duly entered as replied to, and the said Recruit has made and signed the declaration and taken the oath before me at _____ on this _____ day of _____ 191 .

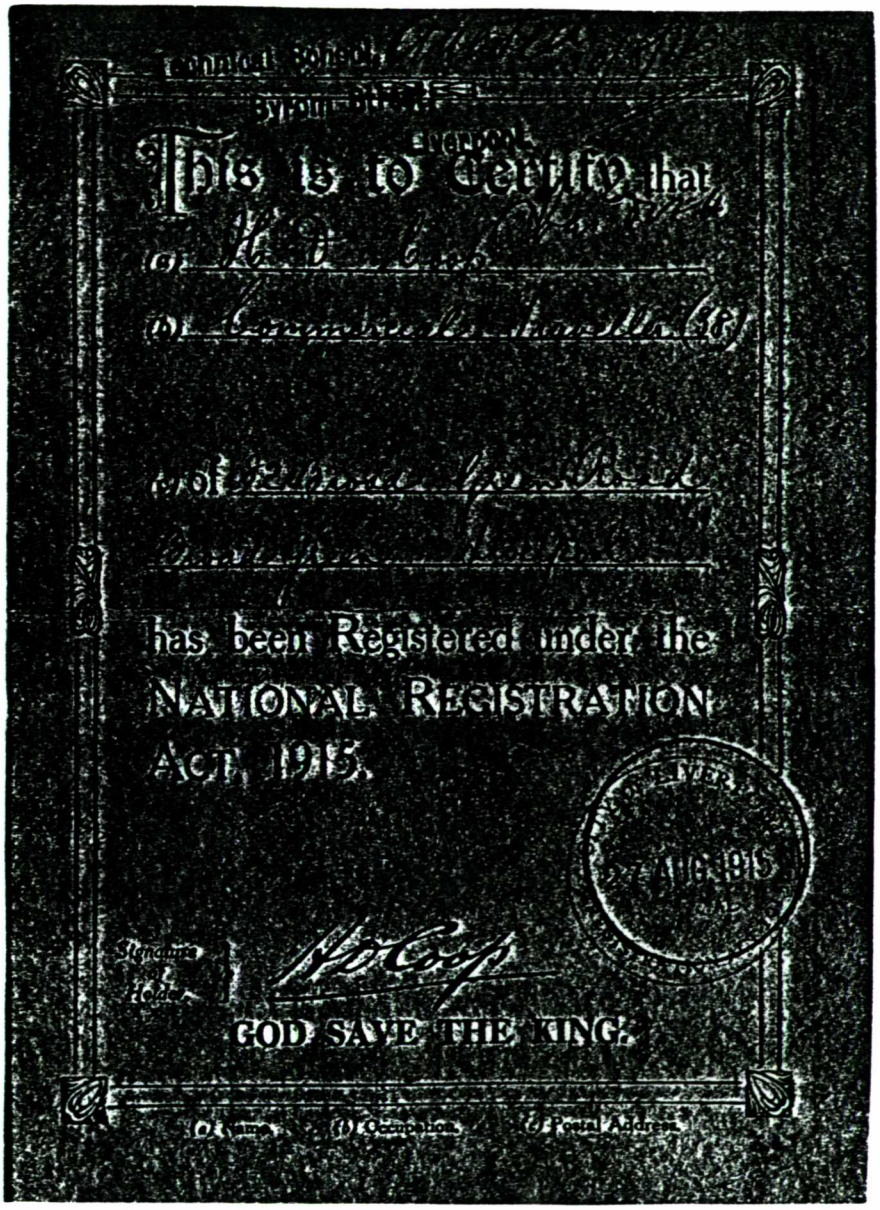
Signature of the Justice _____

I certify that the above is a true copy of the Attestation of the above-named Recruit.

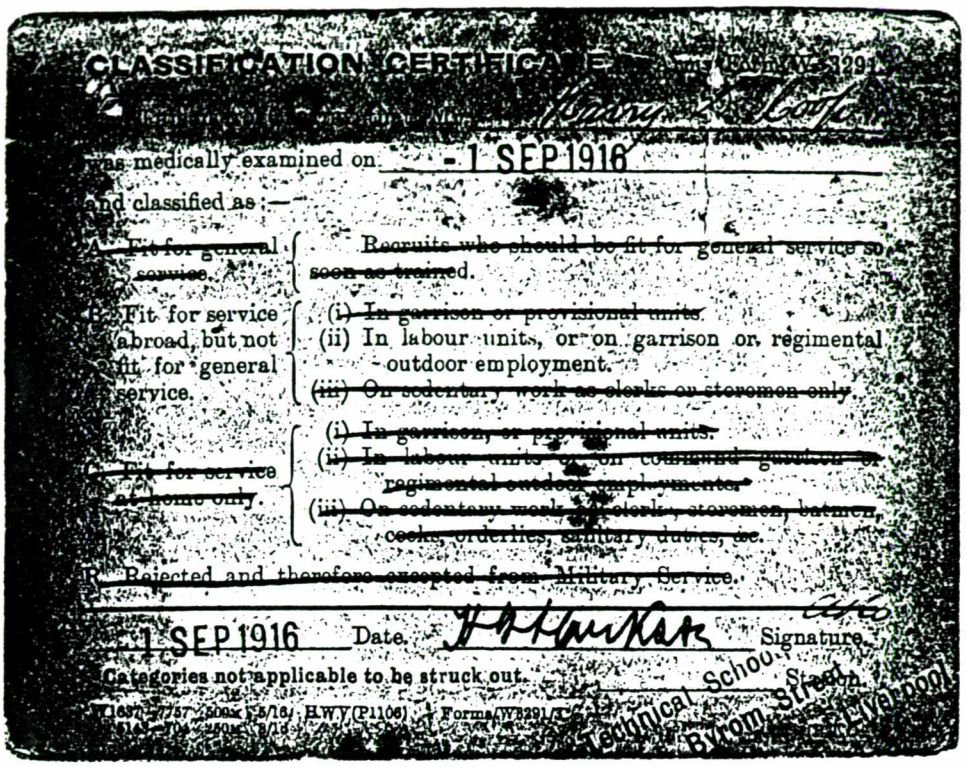
_____ *Approving Officer.*

*If so, the Recruit is to be asked the particulars of his former Service, and to produce, if possible, his Certificate of Discharge, and Certificate of Character, which should be returned to him, conspicuously endorsed in red ink, as follows, viz.—(Name) _____ re-enlisted in the (Regiment) _____ on the (Date) _____

APPENDIX II: National Registration Certificate from August 27, 1915, with the date of attestation in 1916 added to it.



APPENDIX III: Medical classification certificate from September 1916.



CLASSIFICATION CERTIFICATE

Forms W3291

Henry Scott

was medically examined on - 1 SEP 1916

and classified as :—

A. Fit for general service. — ~~Recruits who should be fit for general service so soon as trained.~~

B. Fit for service abroad, but not fit for general service. — ~~(i) In garrison or provisional units.~~ (ii) In labour units, or on garrison or regimental outdoor employment. ~~(iii) On sedentary work as clerks or storemen only.~~

C. ~~Fit for service at home only.~~ — ~~(i) In garrison, or provisional units.~~ ~~(ii) In labour units or on command garrison or regimental outdoor employments.~~ ~~(iii) On sedentary work as clerks, storemen, batmen, cooks, orderlies, sanitary duties, &c.~~

R. ~~Rejected and therefore exempted from Military Service.~~

- 1 SEP 1916 Date. J. H. Tankard Signature.

Categories not applicable to be struck out.

Technical School, Byrom Street, Liverpool

W1637 7/37 500m 5/16 H.W.Y.(P1106) Forms/W3291/C

A. Fit for general service. — Recruits who should be fit for general service so soon as trained.

B. Fit for service abroad, but not fit for general service.
- (i) In garrison or provisional units.
- (ii) In labour units, or on garrison or regimental outdoor employment.
- (iii) On sedentary work as clerks or storemen only.

C. Fit for service at home only.
- (i) In garrison, or provisional units.
- (ii) In labour units or on command garrison or regimental outdoor employments.
- (iii) On sedentary work as clerks, storemen, batmen, cooks, orderlies, sanitary duties, &c.

R. Rejected and therefore exempted from Military Service.

APPENDIX IV: Two samples of letters written in code in order to overcome the rule of censorship which forbade soldiers to disclose their exact location. The first was deciphered into "Etaples", the second into "Somme District" and "Maricourt and Guillemont".

28th July 1916 Friday.

My Dear Mother,

At last I have managed to get hold of some stationary, and I hope you will please forgive me for this long delay. We are encamped at a Base at present to where we came this morning, but as I am not used to this district I don't know exactly whether we came south-west or what, of our previous quarters

When we first arrived after a pleasant sea voyage, we were welcomed in a very encouraging manner, but oh, in spite of the beautiful quaintness of every street with their irregular buildings; the steep, hilly, rough & ready road-ways with white dust, inches deep, absolutely put years on us; — and the troop-trains — by Jove!, slow but not sure, rickety & decidedly not comfortable; in other words, beyond description; are a veritable picture or pattern of steam-trails.

My present address is as follows I think; —

No 1246 B. Company
1/5th East Yorks Regt.
37th Inf. Base Depot
A.P.O. Section 17
B.E.F.
France.

August 3rd 1916
Thursday

My dear Mother & Father,

Since my last letter I have been rushed about so, that it is awkward to find time to write you now. I must say, I've seen a bit, and gone through little stirring minutes, that seemed hours. I've seen on the pictures, soldiers making rash charges with shells cracking in front of them, but I never thought that I should one day go headlong through it myself.

I have been transfered to another battalion so my new address is as follows:

Pte E. O Gale No 1246
16th Platoon D. Company
8th East Yorks Regiment
B. E. F.
France.

One day we went as a working party to make a dug-out, at about 5.0 P.M. and we got lost & kept getting in the road of the shells. It became dark & still we were stumbling & slipping about along the muddy tracks with a guide to help us. At last we got the full force of the wretched firing. The country around was shrouded in darkness & looked fearfully ominous, in fact all this

APPENDIX V: The Louse Problem on the Western Front

THE LOUSE PROBLEM

AT THE

WESTERN FRONT,

BY

Lance-Serjeant A. D. PEACOCK, M.Sc. (Dunelm.),

ROYAL ARMY MEDICAL CORPS (TERRITORIAL FORCE),

Formerly Entomologist to the Government of Southern Nigeria;
Lecturer in Zoology, University of Durham.

LONDON:
PRINTED FOR HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE,
BY HARRISON AND SONS, ST. MARTIN'S LANE, W.C.,
Printers in Ordinary to His Majesty.

1916.

(3) *Procedure for Bathing.*—Man strips in undressing-room, outer clothing handed in or collected for ironing; then enters bathroom and baths; enters dressing-room, given clean change of underclothing, uses insecticide, receives ironed clothing, and dresses.

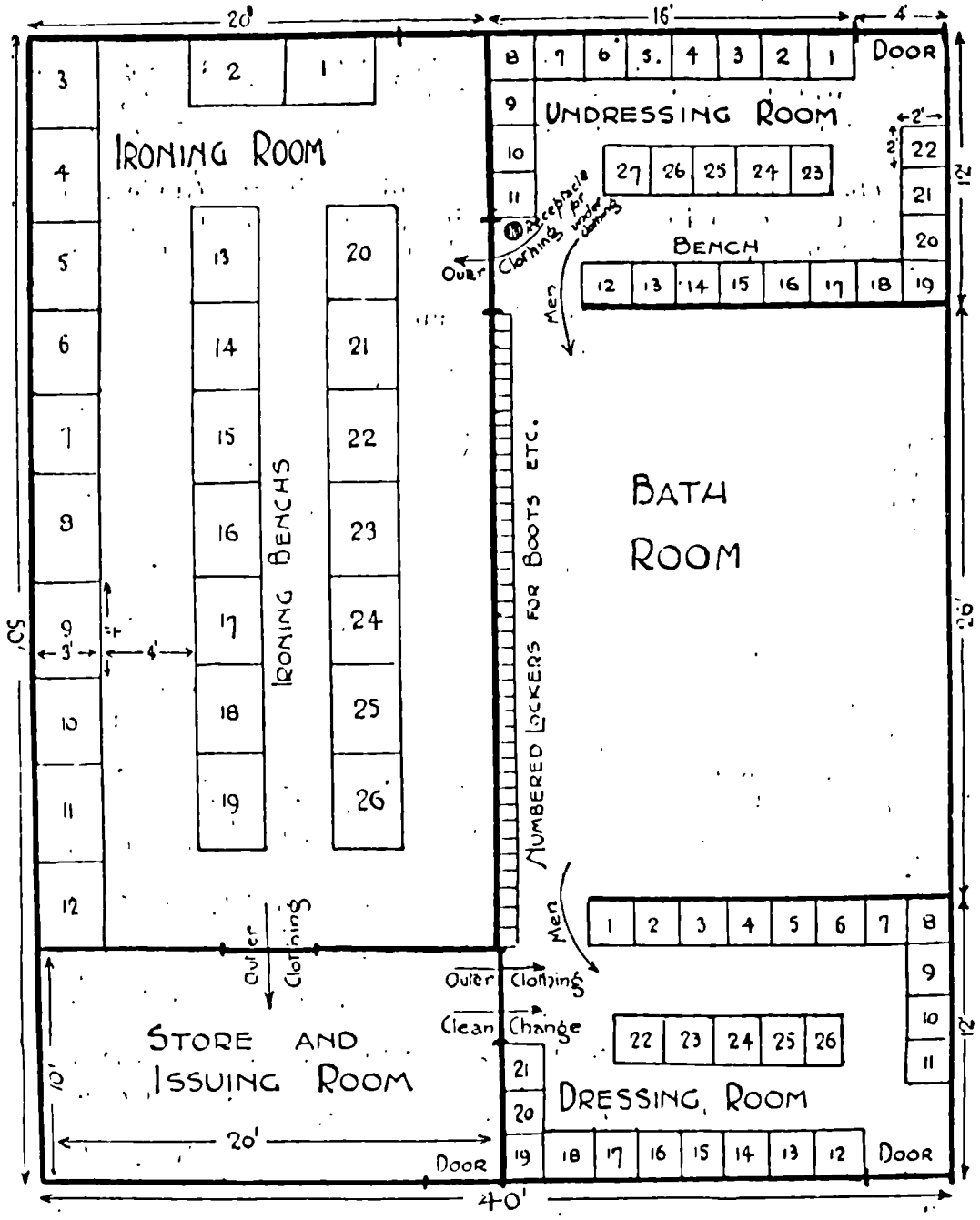


FIG. 10.—Suggested plan for a divisional bath (based upon one now working at the Front). Certain building questions—*e.g.*, lighting—are not discussed.

(4) *Treatment of Underclothing.*—Laundry work may possibly be carried on with advantage at one centre and not at each bath.

(*a*) *Garments Disinfected in Thresh Apparatus.*—Three-quarters of an hour at 215° F. in horse-drawn type; half an hour at

220° F. and five pounds pressure in the Foden lorry type; washed, dried, folded, stored.

(*b*) *Cresol Solution.—Auxiliary Method, suitable for Detached Units.*—Steep garments thoroughly for one hour or more in solution (one pint of cresol to eight gallons of cold water); rinse to rid of surplus cresol; wash, &c., in usual way.

(*c*) *Boiling Water.—Auxiliary Method for Detached Units.*—Allow garments to soak thoroughly and remain in boiling soapy water for five minutes; remove and wash, &c., in the usual way.

(5) *Treatment of Outer Clothing.*—Clothing collected (tunics, trousers, and cardigans) ironed with hot iron, particularly at seams and forks of trousers, brushed with a hard brush, distributed to men in dressing room.

For the Trenches.—While a unit occupies a trench it should be the duty of a man set apart for the work to see that an adequate supply of insecticides is available for distribution to the men and for general use in the dug-outs. Company officers should see that their men take the necessary precautions against the pest.

For Billets.—This applies particularly to infantry in the rest areas and to isolated units, such as ammunition columns and infantry transport :—

(1) Men should be afforded set times for the express purpose of inspecting their clothes.

(2) A general inspection by the company officer or medical officer is recommended at least once a week, but men of known unclean habits require special attention, if only for the sake of their comrades.

(3) A keen look-out for cases acting as bad lice-carriers should be maintained and the men dealt with speedily.

(4) In addition to existing methods for maintaining clean billets, all old clothing should be removed. Floors and skirting boards should be washed with soapy water to which has been added crude oil and cresol.

(5) If bathing and changing facilities do not exist, the ironing of garments should still be attempted.

For Hospitals.—These remarks apply particularly to hospitals and rest stations carried on by field ambulances, where conditions are frequently difficult.

Even if patients are retained for one night, some measures should be employed. When possible a patient should bath, have a change of underclothing, and have the outer garments ironed.

None of these recommendations are difficult in themselves. The real difficulties are in the regular and persistent use of the methods during exceptional and trying circumstances. For troops living in billets and hospitals the work is feasible, but for infantrymen matters are more difficult. It is necessary, however, to emphasise that the most effective measures may be carried on while men are out of the trenches. In the trenches the work necessary is reduced to the regular distribution and use of insecticides.

To conclude, the matters of cardinal importance are, firstly, that a definite plan of campaign be formulated, and, secondly, that the plan

be followed up vigorously by the work of proficient men. It is not so much a problem of pure science as one of common-sense management.

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Abraham A J	account	P.191
Abrey A E	letters	84/41/1
Acklam W R	diary	83/23/1
Adams H L	account	83/50/1
Allfree Lt E C	account	77/14/1
Angel R L	account	88/46/1
Barraclough E C	account	86/86/1
Bass Lt F	diary	77/94/1
Bennet J	diary	83/14/1
Bishop E D	diary	77/111/1
Blore E	letters	86/36/1
Bradbury S	account	81/35/1
Bryan G	diary	80/28/1
Carey F	diary	85/43/1
Clark A G	diary	84/1/1

Cobb W	account	73/188/1
Coleman O	diary	84/9/1
Copson P G	account	86/30/1
Cox C H	account	88/11/1
Creek Lt P	account	87/31/1
Curtis F R	account	87/17/1
Dale Lt J L	letters	P.272
Davies B	letters	83/31/1
Dixon G H	diary	86/57/1
Eccles B F	letters	82/22/1
Evans C R T	letters	87/45/1
Firth W H	letters	88/29/1
Fisher R D	account	76/54/1
Fisher W L	diary	85/32/1
Fraser J	letters	86/19/1
Gale E O	letters	P.331
Grant L F	diary	87/13/1
Hall P R	account	87/55/1
Harris C P	diary	87/33/1
Hart E A	letters	82/22/1
Henderson W B	account; draft of autobiographical novel	81/19/1
Holdsworth E	account	73/147/1
Hollingsworth F	account	82/21/1
Howes H G	diary	79/23/1

Hudson T H	diary	84/58/1
Hughes B W	diary	85/43/1
Hynd A	letters	WWI 78/4
Jamieson A J	account	88/52/1
Jolley F R	account	Department of Documents vd
Pinks E A	letters	85/43/1
Pinks S	letters	85/43/1
Preston P G	diary	M6/160-167/1
Robb W	official documents	85/15/1
Rudge B	account, based on an interview to IWM oral history project	85/39/1
Tempest C A	letters	85/39/1
Thompson J F	letters	72/119/1
Tonkyn W D	diary	Con Shelf
White D N	letters	Con Shelf

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Bird E J O	letter	BBC Great War series
Clegg H	account	88/18/1
Coop H D	diary and official documents	P.448
Coop Canon J O	letters	87/56/1
Cooper E R	diary	P.121

Duckham A	official documents	WWI 78/2
Farrow R W	account	75/111/1
Glasgow Lt W E	letters	73/223/1
Gleave Cpt E	letters	78/31/1 T
Green 2nd Lt H	letters	86/36/1
Hardie Cpt M	letters; official reports on morale	84/46/1
Hayman Mrs L	letters	88/51/1
Ingrey F R	diary	83/6/1
Lawton J T	account	86/48/1
Pile A T	official documents	83/17/1
Preuss L	letter	BBC Great War series
Wilby G F	account	78/31/1 T
Williamson J	account	P.443

Ten volumes of letters, selected at random, from the BBC Great War series were read, and sampled for the purposes of Part III of this study.

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